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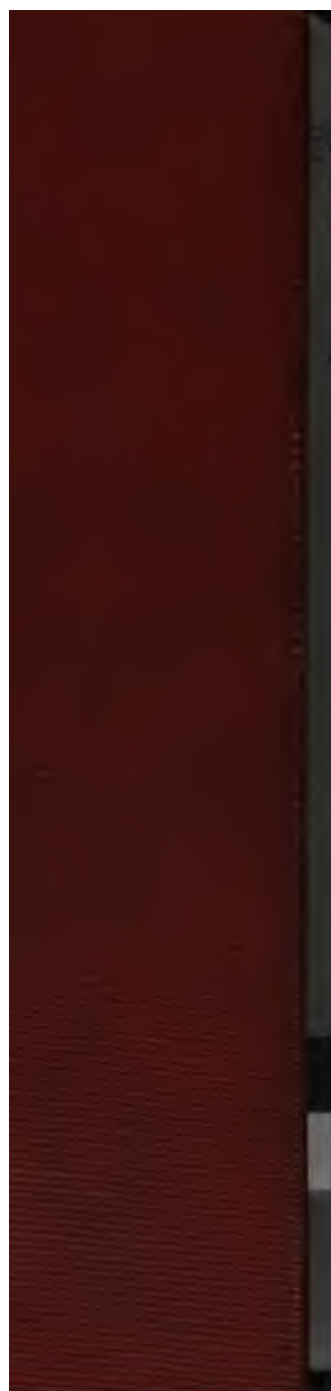
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## THE VANISHING MEN



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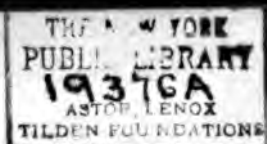
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# THE VANISHING MEN

BY  
RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD  
AUTHOR OF "THE VELVET BLACK," ETC.



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# THE VANISHING MEN

## I

HE had gone to London the moment he was out of uniform, and he had gone there for a reason typical of him.

For most Americans a single track success is an inspiration of life; there is a raw meat satisfaction in hewing to the line until some tree falls and also an instinct for playing the latest game. If it is money making, or trade, or industrialism or production-efficiency, the rank and file go panting after it until some one rings for the undertaker. I have always thought that the source of the imagination which was responsible for Peter DeWolfe's tastes, policy and conduct was most difficult to uncover. The true sense of play, not only applied to play but to all the endeavors of life, even those which are

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usually accounted grim—like war and marriage—is a rare flower to bloom on the American soil; it is still more rare a blossom to find growing on a family tree rooted, as Peter's was rooted, in a bed of money and only fertilized by that humdrum conventional pretense of our large cities which at latest accounts is still giving many persons the same old pale glories.

This rare flower bloomed in Peter and saved him from doing the commonplaces with himself which rich young men who have become orphaned bachelors usually do. It made Peter a great deal more like those individuals, rare enough even abroad—the whimsical Englishman, the adventurous Frenchman, the humorous Spaniard and the practical Russian, who, though they be the white crows of their respective flocks, exceed in numbers the Americans who value full living above that rather uninteresting and easy prize which is called "Success."

Peter took an interest in living. The common run of bachelors who are provided amply with millions accept the alternative of going to hell or going to business; DeWolfe's imagination came to hi

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rescue and provided him with a third choice which, in his quiet way, he seized about the time he left college. It was to live for the sake of living.

To some this might have meant self-indulgence; to Peter it meant an indulgence of mankind. To some it might have meant fads and whims, such as hunting big game from aeroplanes at the source of the Nile; Peter would do that very thing perhaps, but it was an incident not half as interesting to him as an oil field he developed in Texas or a settlement house he promoted in New York. He kept himself as a very neat, well-cleaned slate upon which life could write if it wished; if it failed to do so Peter wrote on it a little himself—enough to keep himself useful. The same man who invented the De-Wolfe milimeter also set down from time to time some charming verses, and the public knows at least one short lyric from the "Leaves of Argonne" which he wrote in the hospital before his promotion to Major.

Dark skin, blue eyes, thin sensitive lips, the appearance of one well bathed in ice cold water, the flexible lean waist of a good horseman, the long

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muscular fingers of a good tennis player who not lost the delicacy of touch which made him something less than a distinguished performer upon cello—these were the outward introductions which made that particularly admirable little group of British gentlemen officers find his acquaintance quickly.

Eversby Benham of the R. A. F. must bear blame for the months in which DeWolfe found great adventure at a time when to Peter adventure had become dull beyond words and the mind-in of himself sitting on a New York park bench, rounded by engaging little foreign brats, listening to a hurdy-gurdy in the summer dusk, was the most exciting and delicious picture conjurable from resourceful imagination of what a wonderful moment of life after a whirl with war could be. It was Benham, who only later went home to the office of the Air Ministry, and who has since distinguished himself in the development of civil aviation, who first steered the young American across the path of Brena Selcross.

"Are you going back?" asked Benham.

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"Home," said DeWolfe, with an attempt to say the word without sentiment.

"Red Cross ladies, Waacs, beautiful high caste Parisiennes and even the charming daughter of your what's-his-name at the bloody Peace Conference—and still a bachelor! By the by, DeWolfe, what happened to your lady with the gorgeous arms at that flubby little café on the south bank of the Seine?"

"An engaging goddess," said DeWolfe. "She is, I believe, a petticoat buyer. She tried to convert me into the Methodist faith. Those beautiful arms are for the neck of some Y. M. C. A. man with glasses and a tickling cough. She borrowed thirty francs of me and then went off to see a daughter of hers who is driving an ambulance near Coblentz."

"You are well armored, Peter," Benham had said, gazing with a reflective and perhaps mischievous smile across the flat fields of France with their tilled squares and wisp-armed trees and thin mists of dusk. "By the by, I say, doesn't this landscape remind one of Corot's paintings?"



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DeWolfe grinned.

"What would make you fall in love with a woman?" asked Benham.

"Almost anything," Peter replied. "But that's not the problem; the problem is what will prevent a man falling out?"

"You're saying that any woman—that is, with the thing you Americans call a come-on, good or bad—may make a man fall in love with her?"

"I was saying that we are all hypocrites. Such a woman would touch us all—affect any of us—me, for instance. We are made ready by a wise nature. 'Stand by for love,' she says, and youth stands by, Benham. But what's the use, if that's all? Life is a long pull. No dimpled chin should be allowed to turn the tide. No discourse of brilliance chattered off like a disc record in a conservatory. No nose-full of the faint odor of violets nor moonlight on a bare shoulder nor a rating of the old man. That's what I mean. That's why most men marry; but I am hardened by too many inspections of dimpled chins."

"From a discreet distance?"

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"Exactly."

"You want more than that pull of the moment or the month."

"To make me give up my own quarters in New York where the sun comes in upon my bare ankles and my coffee, and my Jap brings the newspaper and the cigarettes? I should be glad to say so!"

"You should try Brena Selcoss."

"Who?"

"Brena Selcoss."

"Who is she?" asked Peter carelessly, as he tried his arm out of its bandage sling.

"You like the name?"

"I confess——"

"Of course—so many names of women—just the names—give a man a thrill. Most extraordinary! She's an American, and——"

He paused.

"Well, what?" asked DeWolfe.

"A puzzle," said Benham. "But then you are not interested in women."

"To tell the whole truth, they are my only interest except food," Peter said. "The devil of it is

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that if a man saw ten thousand of 'em he didn't want and couldn't love he'd always expect year after year until he was ninety that the first over the thousand would be the one. Well, that's what leads us on. We all say, 'No, thank you,' when the dish is passed, but we all look to see every last piece on the dish just the same."

"Brena Selcoss is a friend of my sister," said Benham. "I must say she takes the breath out of me. It's that queer combination of beautiful fresh youth with the flavor of all the guile and conspiracy of the ages. She's a Saint Cecilia or a Lucrezia Borgia. But that's not bothering my mother."

"What bothers her?"

"Funny thing. We don't know who she is. From Texas, I believe. With some money. But why does a girl from the United States come down to Beconshire Heath and buy a curate's cottage next to our place and live in a garden and stay out of London and read lying flat on the grass and see nobody and evade all questions? And the look in her eyes! I didn't see it at first because I was in a funk at the eyes themselves."

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"What look?" asked DeWolfe in the hush.

"Fear," said Benham.

"Fear?"

"Yes, fear. And besides there is something about her that tells a person that she is waiting—marking time—treading water—staring out over life—just like a watcher on the shore stares out across the empty sea."

"Maybe she's thinking of an ice cream soda."

"There's nothing of that kind of thing in her," the British officer replied with positiveness. "Your ice cream soda and millinery and looking-glass lady has a personality of a pink color. Brena Selcoss is the color of firelight on the walls of an old temple."

"You might go on to say that she gives the impression of an Inca princess. Some dried mummy from the sands of a prehistoric citadel. Bathed in some magic liquid, her limbs expanded to the lovely contour of girlhood, her face warmed with a renewed coursing of spirited blood."

"You've seen her!" exclaimed Benham.

"My dear fellow, I've never seen her; but I con-

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fess that as you talk about her I feel a little as if I had known her—long ago.”

Benham said, “Perhaps you could lift the cover——”

He stopped suddenly.

“And I’d like to have you meet Muriel too. She’s a very decent sort of sister. I’ve a mind to give you a letter to my mother and send you over the Channel to loaf around in flannels at our place in the country.”

“I’m leaving Brest to-morrow night on a transport. Sorry.”

“Oh.”

“Well, I said nothing about it.”

“Afraid of farewell dinners?”

Peter smiled.

“Home,” said he. “Bring your sister over to America. She’ll probably think it a jolly little unfinished country.”

Benham clasped DeWolfe’s hand and yawned; he had seen the American covered from head to foot with blood out of his own arteries when Peter had brought him in with the aid of an artillery hors

## The Vanishing Men II

It was an intimacy not to be befouled with demonstrations.

"So long," said DeWolfe.

He climbed down from the broken wall of the house where the Englishman had been billeted and with a nod of farewell walked away, leaving Benham perched up there—a black figure as if cut out of black cardboard pasted on the sunset glories of the sky-line.

He walked a hundred paces and stopped. He looked at a group of peasant children bringing in fagots, but laughing and jostling each other as if it were a game. Childhood had been untouched. In one of the little rubble and plaster sheds a newborn calf was bawling, and yet in Paris, as he reflected, serious men were discussing the future of the world exactly as if they could touch or affect its fundamental nature.

He walked on. The trees trained against the high wall spread their branches like fans, edged at the tips with the pink blossoms of a new year, symbolic of the eternal round of promise, fruit and decay.

"It goes so soon," said DeWolfe aloud, and this voice which spoke was just as if some old friend had given him counsel as they strolled together in the dusk. He turned.

The Englishman waved to him from the wall and held one arm aloft in a gesture of farewell; Peter could see every finger on his hand as if they all were painted in sepia on the velvety gold of the sky.

"By the by," called Benham, "the strange lady is half a Greek. I say! Can you hear? Her father was a banished patriot—a fighting professor of chemistry or something."

Peter smiled and waved his hand. He turned the corner of the wall and stepped into the cobbled street where the endless wagons of some French artillery maneuver were rumbling deeper into the ruts of War worn in the ancient stones.

Only at nine that evening did he hear more. Benham called him by the service wire of the Signal Corps.

"Saying good-by, that's all," said the Englishman lying glibly. "Good luck. And I forgot to say that her mother was Irish."



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"Send me that letter to your family care of the American port officer at Boulogne," said Peter calmly after a moment in which Benham wondered whether the line had been cut off. "I'm off for England to-morrow."

He put his cigarette down and allowed it to burn the edge of the table, staring at the wall with its maps and blue-prints, his eyes full of wonder.

This explains, in part, why the reason for his going to London was typical of Peter DeWolfe.



## II

MURIEL BENHAM was savagely a woman. She conceived woman as a species as distinct from males as flora is distinct from fauna. The acquisition by women of the right to vote had been the occasion for mourning, as Peter found out before Mrs. Austin Benham had beamed through two meals first upon her guest and then upon her lovely daughter.

The widow of Austin, as DeWolfe discovered after a week of agreeable neglect of the calendar, was a true beamer. She did not beam with the insincere beam of affectation, but with the beam of an expansive nature oozing good will and demonstrativeness through the crevices it could find in the walls of a life which was like a vessel of conventionality, containing, according to all the traditions of her husband's family, a liquor of precious quality, not to be spent freely. She believed in new things and in a new world, but she beamed upon Muriel not because she agreed with her but because, not

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daring to voice an opinion, she could still love her daughter for being so healthy and so irreproachable.

Muriel considered herself as dedicated by duty and adaptability to being a woman, and being a woman meant that her brown hair must be made attractive and stable for tennis—a game which she executed with a good deal of dash, in a costume designed to keep freckles off a milk white skin. Even her forearms were covered in the game she took from DeWolfe, who made rather a botch of his unpracticed play, because just as it was a womanly woman's duty to be well exercised and in fine condition for the market, so also was it her duty to be milk white in an evening dress. The same thought made her appear before Peter in the hedge-walled garden before breakfast clad in a part wispy and part fluffy gown with a basket of roses hung on one elbow and flower scissors in the other hand.

"You do all things so well," said Peter with a great delight filling his being. "There is a thoroughness in your method which positively upsets me. I looked at the library in your study and as far as I can see you have spent your twenty years

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collecting, among others, books on how to do things—how to ride a horse, how to play golf, how to knit, how to cast a fly, how to speak Italian, how to grow roses and who knows what else.”

The English girl was sincerely grateful to Peter. She said, “To know the way, to practice the methods—these are the sure steps toward results; but you must not think I take myself too seriously, as my brother probably told you. I think it is all as nothing compared to the skill of being a woman—a fit woman—a woman whose one aim is to be a woman.”

“You have attained it,” said Peter, a little light dancing in his eyes under his heavy brows as fireflies sparkle behind a hedge.

The girl tossed the ball up and caught it in her white skirt spread from knee to knee as she sat cross-legged upon the edge of the Benhams’ lawn. This lawn began again after the interruption of the square of tennis court and rolled gently down to a line of trees at the bottom of the hill that half hides the little town of Becon with its nestling red brick houses with their chimney pots and roofs

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tempered by the smoke of coals on home fires. They lived peaceably together without any bold assertions of individuality, none of them doing any outrage to the countryside, as Peter, contrasting it with an American town, had said. Beyond the village were the chalk downs where grass was light green and the heather a deeper color, and narrow roads were as white as marks of crayon, and trees standing alone were like feathery plumes stuck here and there into the rolling country by some giant hand. Somewhere, still further on, was the sea into which the bright sky fell like a blue back curtain flecked with clouds of feathery white.


Peter, with half-closed eyes, gazed out across this magnificence of quiet space toward the distant backbone of a chalk ridge where ancient Britons once drove their cattle into caves and Druid priests had once held solemn rites. He was quite unconscious of Muriel's attention fixed upon him somewhat as a faithful dog watches a master; he had been in many of his own dreams in these ten days and might well be forgiven for failing to notice that something of violence was going on within this

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English girl whose outlines, like those of a volcano, were still clear and cold against the sky, exposing nothing of the fires and steam which may blow their surroundings into fragments.

The most that Muriel had ever said was that Peter was one of the "nice Americans," a patronizing compliment which had made him tell the girl and her mother that he was gratified at that judgment expressed by "the better type of English." He did not know that by the processes within the Benham sister's lovely head, she had weighed carefully his physical appearance, noting his high bronzed forehead, his straight nose, his lean hard cheeks and the thin judicial lips which had been an inheritance of the family ever since Justice DeWolfe had been painted by Copley. She had judged him as one would judge an animal, and satisfied, had methodically passed on to his clothes.

Peter's clothes are famous for their charming incorrectness. No one quite knows how he succeeds in expressing through some expensively fashionable and unimaginative tailor so much of his own brand of distinction in dress. Evening clothes or bath-



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wrap, major's uniform or lounging flannels, it is always the same; Peter's clothes and Peter are one. An envious broker in New York named Moore once said that Peter's clothes even expressed Peter's moods—they could be limp, soft and contented in his idleness; they could stiffen into fine dignity with a turn of his thought. Muriel's father had given attention to clothes; the hunter's-pink riding coat that still hangs in the hall closet in Beconshire Heath reminds his successors of the dominant, rare roast beef personality of Sir Austin. His daughter, like other women who are in the profession of being women, gave importance to the decorative qualities of a male; she only forgot about Peter's face and figure and clothes when they had been swallowed by his complete whole—a whole which defied her methodical judgment and made her eyes swim and began to turn within her heart and body the elementary machinery that two hundred years of Benham tradition had kept locked in neutral.

"Peter, I saw you before breakfast," she said.  
"From my window."

"You saw me?" he said. "Why didn't you call to me and say one of your cheery good mornings?"

She leaned so close that he could catch the faint aroma of the lavender which Mrs. Benham, with a beaming face, sprinkled in the drawers. She said, "Because I was waiting to see what you were doing."

"What was I doing?" said Peter.

"The telescope—father's telescope."

"Oh yes—the telescope," repeated Peter, as if he had been accused of stealing the squeaky old glass. "I did have the telescope, didn't I?"

He was thinking that one could not very well tell hosts like these two women who had treated him as if he were the owner of the estate and of the old stone house and even quaint Spode coffee cups which came on at breakfast, that he had come to Beconshire not to see them. He was thinking that if they had not chosen to mention an acquaintance other than the rather stiff and dull and correct persons who had come to tea almost every afternoon and three or four times to dinners, saved by the Château Yquem graciously left by Sir Austin as a legacy in

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the wine cellar, he could not very well mention this acquaintance. Furthermore he had begun to feel that Muriel in some strange manner of her own had created an atmosphere of a proprietress without any other intimacy than calling him Peter and, upon one occasion, dressing a cut of a hawthorn on the back of his hand with a peculiar tenderness mixed with all the care of procedure that one can find in "What to Do in an Emergency." He shrank from making the one inquiry he would have wished to make.

He now had a chance to make this inquiry, because Muriel said, "You were standing there under that beech tree. I thought——"

"What did you think?"

"That you were looking through the glass across the fields toward that place under the big trees—the place we call the Curate's because one used to live there."

Peter might have spoken then to ask who now occupied the little gabled house with its guardian trees. It was the opportunity to hear a name he had not heard since he had heard it from Colonel



Benham's lips; Peter's characteristic perversity that often made him allow life to set its own pace and bring events at its own whim, added at this moment to his disinclination to disclose one of his reasons for idling under the Benhams' roof. It prevented him from speaking. The sun was warm, there was a fatalistic assurance that he would hear the name soon enough, and there was the possibility that a look of pain would come into Muriel's face and he would hurt a girl for whom he had acquired a good natured, companionable and almost paternal affection.

He only smiled, and Muriel's pink fingers being near upon the grass, he touched them lightly. After a long pause, he said, "I was looking around the country."

"I do not believe you," the girl said, jumping up with startling suddenness.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Into the house. I have a—headache."

She had often insisted that she never had headaches, as if not having headaches was a part of a proper program for a woman who intends to marry

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correctly, have children correctly and be correctly buried with a correct husband's tears. Perhaps this came into her mind, for at the vine-covered portico she turned, put her arm against one of the ancient stone pillars and, making a pretty picture with her high color and her lean young body, she called out, "Do you want a walk this afternoon—to Besman Wood?"

Peter nodded his assent vigorously, and when she ran into the house he threw himself back into the grass and through half-closed eyelids watched the ever-changing patterns in cottony clouds and the flight of wheeling martins.

Muriel began that afternoon walk with great gayety of spirits, as if, perhaps, she had found a triumph over some difficulty, a victory at the end of twenty-one years of preparation for victory. As soon as they had struck off across the downs she threw her arms toward the sky and sang into the wind an old hunting song of quaint and engaging melody.

"Let's learn the song together," she said to Peter. "Look over there on the edge of the horizon. That

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square tower. That's Saint Dunstan's—the very tower in which the fox sought sanctuary in the song—the old song, written six hundred years ago, they say.”

Peter, with his usual adaptability, acquired both words and music. He sang. He danced upon the rolling green plain. And at last seizing Muriel's waist around the belt of her sporting coat, he swung her almost off her feet and together they whirled merrily—two tiny tops spinning upon the vast expanse. When they stopped, the girl, almost dizzy, and breathless, clung for a moment to his coat and looked up into Peter's eyes. He could feel her warm breath upon his chin.

Peter was not lacking in perception; he knew at once that his visit at the Benhams' must come to an end. All the cold assurance in Muriel's face, all the steady, stable English look had gone. No refusal of hers to vote or smoke a cigarette or adopt an article of clothing which in any way might have unsexed her could have proclaimed her as a woman rather than as a companionable playmate as completely as

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did this searching, half-troubled, hungry look in her swimming, brimming eyes.

"Come on now," he said as if to a private soldier who had disobeyed orders. "Let's walk. Let's walk hard and fast and long."

He was wondering now whether he had made his journey to Beconshire in vain, whether indeed his willingness to solve the puzzle that Benham had told him was waiting for him there had not been a piece of folly leading to nothing. When he and the girl had dipped down the slope into the single track path that led across the moor he nearly walked blindly into the silver stream through the rushes that grew at the water's edge.

"You are not vexed?" asked Miss Benham invitingly.

"Vexed!" exclaimed DeWolfe. "With you? God bless you, dear, no!"

She looked up at him gratefully, watching him as she walked by his side a good deal as a setter might look up to catch a glance of approval from a man. Peter expected no storm from her. He knew he must pack up his things and go back to London.

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This was only fair to Benham and certainly fair to Benham's sister who had let herself imagine so much from an acquaintance with a stray American who inwardly believed that to live a lifetime of Muriel's program of days and years would be a close second to a term in jail or to having a berth in a Wall Street broker's office. He supposed, however, that if not actually, at least metaphorically Muriel had read a book on "How to Keep One's Balance." He did not figure upon the explosive forces which can be generated in a conservative family, as if occasionally the fundamentals of mankind liked to show their half-concealed existence of which all are aware, each for himself, but never as to our armored neighbor. Muriel, in fact, was just the person the fundamental human forces would pick out to give a glorious exhibition of blowing up the crusts of restraint. Peter, like most of us, had heard a slight crack in her cover, but like most of us he had endless faith in the strength of habit and conventions.

The depression which fell upon the girl, as if a shadow cast by the dusk, gathering about

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them as they came back from Saint Dunstan's tower after ten miles in the wind, gave no warning of crisis to him. And certainly he was under no obligation to foresee that which the night would bring forth.

At dinner he discovered that he could talk to Mrs. Benham; to his astonishment he found that behind her beam there were a great many years of orderly thinking whose product, not consumed by her family, had been put up onto the shelf in many careful layers like bolts of cloth with an unfashionable pattern. It was almost worth while to have Muriel so silent; it was almost a relief to turn away from her long Byrne-Jones face with its sensitive lips contrasting with her stern eyes and be beamed upon sunnily by the broad strong face of her mother. Peter took a delight in making this beam expand into a laugh. He was never so whimsical. Each time he leaned forward toward the white-haired widow who, with her middle-Victorian figure, weighed at least two hundred pounds, Muriel stared at her mother with a look which might have been the expression of jealousy.

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Peter, as he chatted with Mrs. Benham, faced the long French windows in a curved bay at the end of the dining-room. The floor was covered with ferns and flowery plants in pots, giving forth to the room at all meals that smell of warm dark earth which fills greenhouses; but just outside the reflection of his own dinner coat on the long panes of the doors, there was the blue stone driveway of the house and the path to the side door. Upon this path Peter thought he had seen a flash of white. It might have been a reflection of his own white linen; he had only seen this flick of movement out of the corner of his eye as he put down his gilt coffee cup.

"What did you see?" asked Muriel suddenly.

"I? Why I thought I saw a white spot in the dark out there—like a person's face."

Muriel stiffened. "I don't know who it could be," she said. "Lucy, turn on the light outside the North door."

Peter smiled, but only because he had thought of how red English maids could be—just as red as valets were white.

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The smile disappeared the moment the electric lamp above the outer door just behind the French windows threw down its light like an overturned bucket of yellow liquid. A woman was standing there, and Peter believed that as she had stood in the dark, unseen, she had been looking straight into his face. She wore no hat and her hair piled up in immense snake-like coils was the color of certain frost-turned leaves of Autumn which are neither red nor gold, but both colors at once.

"Her Irish mother!" he almost said aloud. He knew at once who she was. He knew by her hair and her great dark eyes in which, even from a distance, there appeared the expectancy or fear described by young Benham. The British officer had not overdrawn her beauty. There was a still grandeur about it, a permanence, a thing making it awful as well as alluring; it was like the beauty of Grecian sculpture dug from the dust and transformed by miracle into living warmth glowing through a skin which compared to Muriel's fine cold white was as heavy cream is to skimmed milk.



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She stood in the posture which Peter learned later to know was characteristic—a posture of one who waits with resignation. For what? Heaven knows. Perhaps for a reincarnation into a life less troubled, less besmirched with small affairs.

That she wore a white draped gown over which a wrap of flame color hung from her half bare shoulders DeWolfe did not notice. She was one who cannot be described in detail, and her clothes made no impress though their illuminated colors and contrast in any other case might have left a vivid picture. One never saw her except as a whole—a woman too short of stature, if one measured, but the height of a goddess if one only looked; a girl whose face, though capable of a great range of expression, nevertheless changed its moods as slowly as the clouds in the sky change their contours; a human being whose personality belonged, it appeared, to the kind of personalities which are found usually only in a deep forest, or belong to a pinnaled mountain range. Any detail was nothing.

“She has come to see my mother,” said Muriel.

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"So she has!" admitted Mrs. Benham, beaming out through the window.

"I might have known who it was. I heard a high-powered car. But she doesn't like to be driven almost into our dining-room, so she stopped on the South Wing. Let's go into father's den, Peter. Bring the cigars in there, Lucy."

No protest appeared possible. Mrs. Benham had beamed and nodded, and the American could not very graciously say, "Oh, no. I want to stay."

He turned once as he left the dining-room. The woman outside was still waiting at the door for Mrs. Benham to waddle to the latch, the waterfall of light still covering her, still looking in, apparently at Peter, and with a smile and warmth thrown toward him like a message from her great dark eyes.

He could not wipe away the impression of that look. In it there had been a call, an understanding, a password, a magic formula. To shake it off he walked nervously about Sir Austin's old study, stopping before the photographs of members of the House of Commons who had been Benham's friends, but were like the ends of so many empty

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spools to Peter's eyes at this moment. He read an inscription on a portrait of General Wolseley, he touched an ivory idol from Benares.

"Let's light the fire," suggested Muriel in a weak and trembling voice.

"All right," said Peter, and struck a match.

He did not smoke.

"Why not?" asked the girl.

"I have a—headache," he said with a laugh.

"Come here then. Lie down on father's sofa. I don't mind. Be comfortable, Peter."

He stretched out upon the springs bent and sagged by years of pressure of the fox-hunting banker's solid weight, and closed his eyes.

Muriel, who had drawn up a stool, sat down upon it, staring into the firelight. There in the study behind the heavy door which she had closed, the two seemed suddenly very remote.

"I had a wonderful time—this afternoon," she said in a tense and trembling voice which made a struggle to appear normal.

"Good!" said DeWolfe.

Her hand moved timidly forth and her soft fin-

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gers touched his forehead, brushing back the hair.

Peter closed his eyes.

She leaned over quietly and with a little cry hardly audible pressed her lips to his.

He knew what had happened—the real Muriel had come up through layer on layer of tradition, training, pride, habit, restraint. He only was confused by his own stupidity in allowing this to happen.

He sprang up.

"I never did that before. I never—by any one," she said clenching her hands.

"Oh, I say, I'm sorry——" he began.

"Sorry!" she said.

"Of course," he replied with unnecessary coldness. "Of course I'm sorry. I've allowed you to think——"

Muriel's eyes were wide and blazing. She threw her clenched hands apart until her arms were outstretched to their utmost. The firelight was upon her face and Peter could see elementary passions enough upon it.

"You needn't say more," she almost screamed, so

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that suddenly Peter had a great distaste for the exposure of things he did not know had lived in her.

"You needn't say more because I know."

"Know?" said Peter in a low tone, as if inviting her to speak more quietly.

"Yes—know. It's her!" she said, pointing toward the wall where the deer's heads were hung. "I know it's my brother Eversby. He told you about her. That's why you came. That's what you've been thinking about. My brother was a fool!"

Peter raised his hand.

"I kissed you and I'm glad," she went on furiously. "Yes, I am. I'm glad. It has brought out the truth. I never did it before. I'm glad. The truth."

"Yes," said Peter sternly. "It has brought out the truth."

"You came here to see her. I know. I guessed. I knew Eversby told you about her, but you never asked. And I knew why. I didn't want to know. I wanted——"

"I'm sorry," Peter said again.

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The girl came on several paces and leaned forward toward him.

"For God's sake, Peter, keep away from her. She might like you. Of course she'd like you. And if she liked you——"

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I know. I can't tell. It's a matter of honor, a matter of confidence—her confidence—something I learned. I wish I didn't know. But I warn you."

She moved toward the door.

"Wait a moment," he said.

"No. I want to go. I hate you now, Peter. Yes, I do. It has been awful enough. I never want to see you again. If you will only go while I hate you!"

"Of course," he said.

"But she is——"

Muriel stopped aghast.

"Well?" he asked.

"I can't tell you. But I warn you. It is too awful to believe. If she takes you in, you will—— This is all I can tell."

"What?"

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"Vanish," she whispered, "—like the others."

The door closed after her.

"Too late to go to London to-night," he said, looking at his watch. He listened for a moment. There was rain upon the window panes. "Vanish? Vanish—like the others? Oh, it's absurd. A piece of jealous outburst. Vanish? Nonsense!"



### III

THE name of Peter DeWolfe, U. S. A., was upon the register of the Carleton Hotel written in a hand purposely scrawled and blotched to prevent any one in the flux of diplomats, army officers, correspondents and gentlemen adventurers, the classes from which this rich New York bachelor drew a large and almost affectionate acquaintance, from bellowing through his door to come down to the bar.

He was waiting for a steamer that had made up her mind frequently not to leave Liverpool for another five days. Two nights he had spent already in London where, if he had wished, he might have dined at at least one of half a dozen recognized homes, had luncheons with a Russian ex-ambassador or Tommy Caminthorn of the War Office or Boleby Broke, the critic who writes the reviews for the *International Gazette*, or taken breakfast with Mrs. Holderee Rabb, the widow of a certain Maharajah's son who had gone wrong at Oxford. He



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had an inclination, however, to write verses and wander by himself through the naughty jam of soldiers and yellow-haired girls in Leicester Square and the Circus. He ate his meals in lonely state.

Unfortunately the unpleasant flavor which had attached itself to the memory of his visit to Beconshire Heath still clung. He could see Lady Benham—that good old soul who had insisted that she never be addressed by her title—beaming at him as she told him how sorry she was that business had called him away so suddenly. He felt guilty of the polite lie he had told to make his exit from the lives of the Benhams. He could see Muriel's cold, hard expression when, having pressed her lips to his, she found no response and told him at once that she hated him. He would never see her again, and though it had been none of his fault, or at least not in large measure, there would be a certain impression in her mind that he had willfully dislodged her from her correct and virtuous pedestal and Colonel Eversby Benham—a good friend, provided with a sense of humor—could not fail to see the affair through his beloved sister's unimaginative eyes.

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Peter had tried to reach him through the Air Ministry and found that on forty-eight hours' notice he had gone to Mesopotamia.

Above all, Peter had gone to England to do a certain thing—to meet the strange Brena Selcoss and at Benham's challenge dissolve the mystery which surrounded her. All that he had accomplished so far had been to look once into her wonderful eyes from a distance and hear from Muriel that terrible and unspeakable and undisclosed horrors awaited the man upon whom this extraordinary young woman, with her mixture of Grecian and Irish blood, her gorgeous hair and jersey cream skin, her American origin and her inexplicable English isolation, bestowed her favor.

Peter had always said that many men were really two persons—one, the actor in life, clothed with a body of flesh and bone; the other, a second personality without tangible reality, but who, as a counselor possessed of a voice almost audible, often advised caution, sometimes played the rôle of conscience, was always a friend, but sometimes took on a damnable, patronizing manner. It was this in-

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visible friend who had advised Peter to shut himself up with his attempts at verse writing and had led him to procure a passage home; it was Peter himself who knew very well that he would not go on board the *Aquitania*, that he had come to England to meet some kind of a witch woman, that he had seen her great dark eyes once and saw them gazing at him out of every corner now, that he had committed himself to finding out all that was to be known of her and that in the end he would do some unconservative, break-neck thing to throw himself with a crash of conventions into her lap and note what happened afterward.

Peter's determination, making ready to reject every advice of his counseling and invisible second personality, was completely wasted. Brena Selcoss acted first.

On the third afternoon of his restlessness, when the night was falling and the fog leaned on the exterior of the window panes of his room like a pile of wet sheep's wool, he had started a lyric twenty-two times and twenty-two times balked for meter or expressive word, had crumpled up the sheet

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of paper and thrown it at a wastebasket. His pencil was blunt; the crumpled sheets, in the evil gray light of late afternoon, having missed their receptacle, lay around the floor as if DeWolfe's product were not poetry but snowballs.

"I'm a nice chump to be writing verses," he said to himself in the mirror. "You look less of a poet than a lion-tamer."

Some of Peter's friends who are able to realize that this man who can play polo like a centaur actually is the author of the lines beginning, "Call ye to the souls of shadows," would have agreed with him. There were strips of interwoven muscle upon his bare brown forearms and a firmness about his mouth, both tightened a little by his service with the Army, and if there is a poet in him it is as a Virginia farmer once told him, "a streak of something," perhaps indeed a part of that fundamental essence of Peter which calls him to a many-sided life.

As he looked at his own troubled face in the mirror the telephone bell rang.

"Are you there?" inquired the operator, using

the conventional London phrase. "Right! Wait, please."

He heard a voice which came out of distance like a voice which comes nearer through a damp grove of dark green trees, like an aroma which comes forward on the wind, until it rose slowly to its full power. When the words were distinguishable he knew that some one was asking for him.

"Yes," said he, for the moment held enthralled by the warmth and rhythm of that voice.

"I must see you."

Brena Selcross had come to find him. She had taken the initiative; she had come to London. He did not have to say, "Who is this?" She had come.

Something, however, in that phrase, "I must see you," said with intensity by that extraordinary woman, about whom the Benhams knew so little and perhaps Muriel so much, filled Peter for the moment with an inexplicable dread. This sudden chill of self-preservation was not founded upon the repulsion of that telephonic, "I must see you," uttered by a female and always the forerunner of

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the unpleasant, nor was it based upon the suspicion which he had always had when, to use one of his own phrases, "a man ought to know that no woman who comes toward one is safe," nor indeed did it rise from the fact that he gave new credit to Muriel's absurd warning that men who knew Brena Selcross disappeared like broken soap bubbles. The dread that Peter felt was like a dread communicated by some subtle message in a human voice which expressed some eternal fear. It came, perched upon his soul for a second, and then was gone.

He became at once the usual Peter, thinking quickly, alive to the dangers of a woman who would follow a stranger to London, suspicious of her and above all thoroughly delighted to risk himself in any tangle she cared to weave for him.

"Where are you?" he said genially.

"At Mulberry's," she said.

"The tea room?"

"Yes."

"Will you wait for me there?" asked Peter.

"Please." His voice sounded very young—com-

pounded of the breathless expectancy and spontaneous pleading of little boys.

He found her sitting at a table beside a window overlooking Bond Street where the fog was like a gray stew and passersby hurrying home were like solids stirred up to the surface from the bottom of some kettle. She greeted him with a quiet smile and pointed to the empty chair.

Peter, conscious of his shrewdness, said exactly what she had said—nothing. He sat down across from her, and for the benefit of the waitress whom he could see out of the corner of his eye as a black dress and white apron, he pointed to Brena's steaming chocolate and nodded. He did not take his gaze from his companion's large dark eyes which had in them the same look he had seen once before and which had made him think of eyes which knew no death but had been looking out upon the world for centuries and centuries. A friend of his had once advanced the idea, at a dinner party in New York, that men and women's souls were new or old, that some of those present had been aged through countless residence in human form back through eras of

## The Vanishing Men 45

history, that others had been created only a few hundred years ago and that still others were new souls just out of the wrapping. Peter recognized as he looked into this young woman's eyes that if he, in worldly terms, were a half a dozen years older than she, in fact, she had outlived him in rounds and rounds of ages.

Her eyes were so compelling that it was difficult to give attention to the fact that her countenance had in it a baffling riddle. Her face was long with a straight and perfect nose below a forehead which might be considered by a classicist lacking a good fraction of an inch in height. She had a full rounded chin below lips so flexible and of so warm and rich a moist color that their thinness was scarcely noticeable. But there was combined in her features, which taken together were by no means perfect, a still beauty which represented the Greek in her, with some undercurrent of shimmering chameleon elusiveness.

"You are shocked at my behavior," she said at last, arranging the white ruffling at her throat as if



she preferred to treat Peter's state of mind casually. "Perhaps you are pleased."

"The two go together," he said quickly.

"You did not ask me who I was. Yet, you had never heard my voice before."

"That struck you forcibly after you left the telephone," Peter told her with authority. "It was not surprising. I had never heard your voice. But I had seen you. It was only necessary to look at each other——"

"Yes, that was memorable," she said solemnly, and looked far away. "But unfortunately the tempo of this meeting does not warrant that little laugh of yours," she went on in reproof. "I came to London to see you, but I came because of Muriel Benham."

Peter looked up in dismay. He said, "You don't mean that she told you——?"

"No one told me," said Brena Selcoss. "You were there. I heard scraps of conversation. Once I heard my own name. It was no fault of mine. Nor is it a fault of mine that with Mrs. Benham's word or two about Muriel's desire to go away, after

## The Vanishing Men 47

your sudden departure for London, that I can see what has happened. I have come down from the country to beg you to go back."

Peter shook his head from side to side.

"In some way—some mysterious way—just such a thing as this involves me always. I have been, unwittingly, the cause of——"

"Oh, no you haven't," said he, with vigor.

Apparently she did not hear; she leaned forward and said with great earnestness, "It touched me deeply—not because Muriel was once a great friend to me—but because I cannot bear——"

He interrupted her again by saying, "The whole thing is nonsense, Miss Selcoss. I am sorry that the only way I can put an end to it is to be ungallant. The plain truth is that I do not have the slightest emotion of any kind about Miss Benham. No doubt she is a very admirable English girl—she is healthy, lovely and correct. No doubt there was an unfortunate misunderstanding, but it was not because of any inclination of mine, and nothing need be said about it. I left Beconshire Heath because of it."

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Brena sat back in her chair with a sigh which appeared to Peter to state, sincerely, relief from a great anxiety. She folded her expressive hands, interlocking her fingers, free of all rings, and allowed her eyelids to almost close.

"I would have liked to stay longer," he said.

"Why?"

"To see you."

"You did not know of me."

"I had seen you."

"But I would not care much for that kind of judgment," she said. "It is man's great delusion to base inclinations on a glance."

"Women do it too," said Peter. "I admit—we both admit—that it is a mistake, don't we?"

"Yes—perhaps. I am not sure."

"Then you too hoped that I would stay?"

She neglected his question completely, but she did not rebuke him for that smile of pleasure that had arisen with the idea that she too had a belief that upon a rare occasion the exceptional first exchange of the eyes is a true and a wise guide to the

## The Vanishing Men 49

importance of the future. Peter felt a glowing sense of understanding and of companionship.

Suddenly, with a quick tensivity that startled Peter, she looked swiftly about from face to face of the persons, men and women, who sat at the other tables. He saw in her eyes at that moment the look which Benham had described so vividly—that expression of fear of some unknown peril.

“You have been in the country a long time,” he said as promptly as he could. “You do not like London.”

She smiled rather sadly. “I love London. But I choose to stay at my little retreat among the old beech trees. I have not come to London since last summer.”

“And you have no inclination to play in London—to forget Beconshire for a day?” he asked. “Of course, now you are here.”

“I do not know any one in London now,” she said. “I have an apartment here—one which I had when I first came to England.”

“Came to England?” He inquired when, without using the words.

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"Yes, three years ago. I think it must have been three centuries."

She sat for a long time thinking, and the coming and going of the waitress with check and change did not interrupt her thought. Peter believed that she was debating something; therefore he said, "Life—even little life—the pleasures—the decent pleasures—well, they ought to be seized."

"You have a sentient mind," she said, awakened.

"Then do it, whatever it is," he said. "There are two kinds of persons in the world—the minus persons and the plus persons, negative folks and positive folks. You notice I say folks; I am from America."

"So am I," she said.

"Well, do it!" said Peter, referring to the undisclosed problem.

"Perhaps I have shut myself up too much," she said reflectively. "I did not know how much I loved to see human beings—just see them sitting here and there, walking in the street, jostling each other, so various, so like——"

"Unsolved riddles."

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She looked into his face long and as if conducting a search.

"I want to stay in London for a few days," she said at last, shaking her gloves as if to express the thrill it would give her.

"Why not?" asked Peter. "Even if staying in London is the hazardous business which you seem to think it is, no one will know."

He waited.

"Except me," he said.

Her eyelids narrowed almost imperceptibly as she answered. "But doubtless dozens of persons claim your time here. It is, to use your expression, known that you are in London."

"No, no, no," protested DeWolfe impulsively. "Not a soul."

She drew on her gloves.

"I think I will stay in London," she said, and Peter thought he heard her murmur under her breath, "God forgive me."



#### IV

HE was reckoned a shrewd player of life. Men who knew Peter DeWolfe best say that if he left his traveling bag on the sidewalk on Fifth Avenue while he did his shopping within some store, it was only because he had estimated carefully the psychology of any thief and concluded that one could depend upon human nature to believe that luggage sitting alone on the pavement was placed there as a trap. Peter always found his bag where he had left it.

This is said because, unless some complex reasoning and calculation of the same kind can be applied to his conduct, it is necessary to say he went blind into love of woman.

"A few—a very few—men—and fewer women," Peter said once in a letter, "know just how near the top of the world can be reached by the adventure of free days together where there are no hours, and

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time springs in magic jumps from noon to next daylight perhaps, and the world is a playground and a city is your toy and mankind is the ultimate friend of both of you. Unfortunately," he added, "the men who have the quality of greatness to see that such a companionship over a span of hours is a greater accomplishment than a life in a law office or the presidency of some blooming bank, are few. Those who ever find the girl are fewer. And those who can prove some essential quality of a gentleman and a whole man needed to walk that delicious tight-rope up above the moon, without taking a vulgar step into space with a nasty crash on landing, are fewest of all."

He may have been demonstrating these words. But apparently he had abandoned his inquiry into the mystery of past and future. He had abandoned suspicion of her or curiosity about her life, though ever and again he found her glancing around with the unexplained fear in her dark eyes, as if she expected to meet the eyes of recognition or find some fiend walking softly along behind. Outwardly he had given over all but one inquiry, and that was the



exploration of the heart and mind and soul of Brena Selcoss as they met his companionship.

Just when he had shelved his first purpose, awakened by Benham's challenge, and when he wiped from his mind the memory of his one moment of dread of this girl, which of course might be traceable to Muriel's extraordinary and tragic warning, perhaps Peter himself could not have told. It might have been at the moment when, after their first evening of strolling aimlessly through the mystery of the symbolic fog with their selves reaching toward one another, they had perched like two ravens on the pediment of Trafalgar Monument, supperless, content, and watching the blurred lights of one motor omnibus after another move like luminous fish in cloudy water.

"What time is it?" Peter had asked, listening in vain for the great bell of St. Paul's.

Brena Selcoss, sitting on her own coat, drew back the loose sleeve of her white silk waist from her rounded cream-colored wrist, and after a glance at her watch, had said, "It is after two. I am hungry and I am cold."

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Peter had said quickly, "Perhaps it is my fault. But you wouldn't go to the theater or the cafés. How could I deal with any one who stubbornly insists upon exploring alleys and arcades and the banking district and Hyde Park until an old campaigner's legs are almost worn out?"

"You couldn't."

"I shall find a place now and I shall like to see you eat," he had said, jumping up. "There are some persons, after all, who give us delight when they eat. Did you ever see an old French peasant woman who was really fond of animals feeding them? Why, her brown wrinkled old face has a smile like a lighthouse! And I can imagine wearing that smile when one's own children are over their bowls of gruel. Yes, I shall like to see you eat. I am sure. I would like it still better if I had planted and harvested or caught everything which was put before you. But that cannot very well be because I'm not a farmer or a trapper or Isaac Walton—only a New York idler. Besides Trafalgar Square has no soil for turnips, no brook trout, no pheasants."

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She had looked up with a wistful smile. "Who is pleased when you eat?"

"Nobody," he said. "You see I am an orphan. There is an old waiter at the Club. I forgot him. He rubs his hands when I am hungry, but for all I know it is because the palms itch. He waited on my father—the banker—and he looks like a shaven Mephistopheles. That's all I can remember."

"You may come with me then to my chambers," she had said. "We can stop on the way—goodness knows where—but somewhere and get eggs and butter and cheese and milk. We'll go there."

"Can you cook!" he had exclaimed.

"Oh, no. Not at all. Does that make any difference?"

"Why should it?" Peter had inquired with sincerity. He had come to the point of departure from his first ideas of his destined relationship with Brena Selcoss.

In the days which had flowed on, Peter's coming and going at the new hotel to which he had moved so that no one might attach themselves to him, attracted the attention of the doorman with the worn

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livery, brass buttons and chronic apoplexy. "A wery peculiar young 'un," he had said to the porter. "A wery odd 'airpin! 'E's in an' hout at hall hours. I think 'e's gaming."

Perhaps he was. That might have been how he began. But the delight of a concentrated nothing-to-do settled over the two and Peter's steamer at last left the dock at Liverpool with American soldiers blaspheming between decks like a swarm of hornets returning to their hive and a purser scratching his head over the name of one DeWolfe, who was printed on the passenger list but did not claim his telegram. Peter had lost himself, and like a runaway child he was glad of it. There was only this difference—for Peter no one but his lawyers would make a search.

If one desires to know how far the breaking down of conventions had gone, it is only necessary to point out that upon one occasion where a laughing Sunday crowd had gathered about a hectic man preaching revolution from a stepladder in Hyde Park, Peter had sat down with the girl to listen. The sunlight was comfortable, the voice of the

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orator rose and broke with the regularity of waves upon a long warm beach, and Peter, dropping back with his head on the grass, watched a silvery airplane up from Hendon wheel about like a gray beetle who couldn't decide where to light, until he fell asleep.

When he awoke he was generating apologies. He intended to say that Brena and he, like fairy folk, had acquired the magic exemption from sleep but that, of course, occasionally——

None of his embarrassment was negotiable; she too was asleep; her hair, with its red-brown variations of autumn leaves, was alive with the sheen of the sunlight, her arm was under her forehead. The orator had spun his web to the end and all the crowd had buzzed away like escaping flies; but a little stray dog, with a face badly needing soap and water, had gone to sleep at her feet with its face on its paws, whining over a dream of a piece of meat with legs which could run faster than he.

To them life had become abundant with those unnoticed values, neglected by the commiserable blind beings who run along the ruts of unimaginative

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existence with their hands put into the coarse fist of some conventional, vulgar purpose. Together they went to the docks at night and listened to Chinese coolies in the galley of a tramp steamer from Hong Kong, where up from the yellow smoking interior as from a yellow smoking volcanic crater arose the strange crooning, bubbling, wailing songs of the Far East. They went to Hampstead and laughed at the smug little houses with their washed, respectable faces. They strolled through the National Gallery where they found a room of portraits of men of the time of Pitt, all of whom, as if by a manner of the time, had their hands thrust palm down into their buttoned coats; they called it the Stomach-ache Gallery. They sat on strange doorsteps while Peter wrote verses to the unknown inmates behind the barrier. They invited a match woman to dine with them and were well repaid by hearing from her lips a discourse upon the conceit of each age which always flatters itself into the belief that it is the world's crisis. They said good-night at all hours, they ate when hungry, and were as skillfully silent when the mood came as they were

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spontaneously chattering when their minds danced together.

Peter might have guessed, but he could not have known to what crisis this would lead.

"We have not forgotten how to play," he said to her.

A look of pain had come into her face, and into her eyes the old look of fear.

"I don't like it when you look like that," he had said.

"How?"

"Afraid."

"I'm afraid of nothing, Peter—nothing which makes ordinary fear in ordinary hearts, Peter. You will see some time that I am not afraid."

She had laughed at his perplexed expression, but without joy.

"Don't you bother about me," she told him. "You've promised that you wouldn't, you know."

He nodded. "I've kept my word."

"Perhaps——"

"What?"

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"Perhaps I'd better go back to-morrow—back to Beconshire."

It was the first word suggesting the end of their holiday. Both knew that this word must finally be spoken, but Peter had not expected to see quite the quick pallor which came into Brena's face as she forced out the sentence.

"We agreed, Peter, didn't we? And the time has come, I think."

DeWolfe felt as one who had been touched suddenly and unexpectedly upon the elbow by the dank, bony fingers of a corpse.

"There is one evil passion which I think does more harm than all the others," he said, clasping his strong hands over one knee. "It's fear. It ought to be made a crime."

"You know nothing of fear," she replied quietly. "You have not lived with fear day in and day out—year after year."

"No, I have not lived with fear at all," he went on, looking straight into her eyes. "I have not lived with it because it is a parasite. I have been wounded, but I learned that five-eighths of the pain



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was fear. I have been apprehensive of some terrible calamity and the fear was the major part of the calamity. There are men in the world in myriads who fear that they may lose their money. Fear is worse than poverty, Brena. For God's sake, let's not fear!"

"I did not say that I had fear," she said. "I only said I had lived with fear."

"The world is a fool about fear," Peter drove on. "It makes cowards, but it is also the mother——"

"Of what?"

"Of murderers," he said.

Brena was silent.

To Peter, as the day came to an end, it became more and more plain that she had indeed decided to go from London. She spoke of it as if it were a flight from some kind of danger. Once she said, "You are much too nice to take any risks, Peter." He had asked her about these risks, but she said, "Among other risks, that of wasting your energies on something which leads nowhere." When they had dined at a little café on Jermyn Street, she said, "Come home with me. No one sees us go in and

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out. It is like a nest hidden in an old stump. We can talk and then——”

“What?”

“Good-by. Good-night. Good-by.”

All the way up Regent Street she kept her arm through his as if she feared that suddenly the mortal part of him would melt away, as if this contact might be made so real that it would live on in memory, and sometimes the illusion of this strong forearm, warm through its sleeve, might return to her.

The apartment, which she had retained without occupancy for some unexplained cause, was on a street of colorless brick houses where three street lamps, spaced with irritating precision, spread their radiance on the front walls in a fan-shaped insolence. It was in a house at the far end of this street—modest quarters for one who appeared to have plenty of money at her command; two flights of carpeted stairs led up to a little landing and her door.

She lit the lamp in the corner while Peter took the key from the hole, and the expanding light

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showed again the gray and gold room with its chintz curtains and its old English mahogany and the carved desk with its burly-maple panels and the hangings woven in Java at the windows. But Peter closed the door gently with his foot because he saw none of the room where the light was dim. Once more, as when he had seen her first, she stood beneath a light which poured down upon her its flood, emphasizing her as if she, of all the universe, had the quality of radiance and life. She had thrown aside her cloak; she stood with an aura of eternal youth about her, a girl who had come out of the ages and would live on without end, the center of all things. She gazed back at Peter from her dark eyes, wondering, waiting for him to move.

He walked toward her slowly, but without hesitation. In his face there was a square look—the look of a fixed will that has come into its own at last.

“Brena, I’m going to break my promise.”

“Yes, dear, I understand. I can resist you, Peter. It would be hard, but I could do it. I do not want to do it. The promise was for your sake, Peter. Not for mine alone.”

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"I've asked you nothing—no questions," he said, putting his hands upon each of her shoulders and holding her at arm's length.

"No, Peter—none."

"Because I did not care," said he.

"No matter what might come?"

"No matter what might come."

He drew her toward him and took a breath of the unperfumed fragrance of Brena Selcoss. And then with eager, hungry yearning, expressed only through the restraints of tenderness and profound respect, as if indeed he had some ancient deity in his arms, he kissed her lips, he pressed his cheek into her hair, he touched the back of her neck with his fingers.

"I love you," he said. "Can you understand all I mean by those plain words—I love you?"

"I love you, Peter."

"You must never leave me now."

She sprang back, tearing herself from him as if he had treacherously plunged a knife into her.

"Not that, Peter. Not that! I thought you knew. I thought this was—good-by."

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Like one in great pain which must be borne in silence, she threw back her head and stood quivering and tense.

"You can't have misunderstood!" she said in a breaking voice. "Is this my punishment—that you have misunderstood?"

"I want you, Brena—forever. I could have sworn I never would want any one—like this."

"Peter, it cannot be."

She seized his hand and, leaning over, pressed her wet cheek upon his wrist.

"It cannot be, Peter. It happened when I was no more myself—the one you know—than I am Muriel Benham. It happened when I was less than eighteen—seven years ago. I am married."

"Married?" he gasped, putting his other hand lightly upon her cheek. "Where, then, is he? How long ago did he——"

"Go?"

"Yes."

"Three years. I loathed him. I loathed his eternal fright."

"And where is he now?" he asked.



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"I do not know."

She shuddered.

"He——"

"Vanished."

Peter was white. Breathing hard, he said, "You—Brena—will you tell me everything?"

"Yes, Peter—before I go. I will tell you everything. It will show you why I am afraid—for you."

## V.

BRENA SELCOSS had been born on American soil.

One of her most vivid memories was that of her father, an austere man, who all his life long had carried about in the great and muscular body with its slow movements and its suggestion of latent giant power, a restless soul, ever seeking to find its way hither and thither like a strong giant ant of unceasing activity looking for new work.

She could remember dimly that her mother, whose hair never lost the red-gold Celtic glory until she and her second child died together when she was forty-two, had referred with whispered awe to the turbulent career of her husband, Demetrius. There were vague recollections of the mother's pride in the fact that he had risked and lost his career, begun so early in life and so brilliantly in chemical research and in a professorship in Athens, that he had tossed aside all consideration for himself to labor for a

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constitutional Greece and to risk his life in a conspiracy for freedom.

Mary Vaughn, as her name had been before her marriage, knew something of insurrection herself; she had had the ill fortune to be the daughter of the famous Tom Vaughn who was forced to flee Ireland with his family after the unsuccessful and forgotten "Secession Plot" of the 50's. Mary, from the time she was a child, sang like a bird. She might have become a famous contralto, for her voice had that same warm, rich quality inherited by her bewitched daughter, but like a bird her true home was upon the open moors with their free spaces and the shadows of the clouds passing over the grass; New York, of adamant and rectangles, was as good for the joy of her voice as it would have been for that of a wild nightingale. She never spoke harshly of that "turrible Babylon," however, without adding, "But 'twas there I met your father, Brena, and I'll speak no ill of it."

So, with some of her sparkling self dimmed, she gave all her expression of loyalty to her husband; her flight upon gauzy, unsubstantial wings was al-



ways a circle about his head, as if she were a brilliant moth hovering about the top of a grim mountain which always quivered, threatening volcanic disasters. Something had died within her when they took her from the moors and the open places, and that which was left was an Irish beauty and a bottomless well of affection for her man and her Brena.

"It is from her that I have a legacy," said Brena. "It is a storehouse of unspent passion and tenderness. And it is still mine—to do with as I please."

She did not go on to say that those to whom it would be opened might enter to be destroyed.

Brena could not recall the details of her mother's accounts of the part her father had played in the disturbed period of Greece. There were vague impressions of a secret organization under the "Council of Twelve" to which he had sworn devotion, of a problem of honor which he had decided by following a course of conduct that had brought down upon him the penalty of assassination. A sharply defined portrait of this young patriot, a member of the Salamis Deputation of 1862 informing King Otho, the last of the Bavarian alien monarchs, that the

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throne of Greece was vacant, remained in Brena's mind. She confessed to a thrill of pride that upon an occasion, historic and momentous, her father, then only twenty-eight, had been present in a major rôle. This had been the top moment of his life; those whom he had aided turned upon him. The strength of a powerful secret organization, gradually falling into unscrupulous hands after its true functions were over, had been turned against him. His name became a traditional center of oaths of vengeance; with knife wounds upon his great arms and thighs and an unremoved bullet in his shoulder, he came to America. He was a man who had lived one life, and expected the world to recognize him as an important being. It saw in him only a silent, learned man, inventing a thousand ambitions and from them choosing no fixed purpose, disregarding money in a land where money, for the time, was the fetich, careless of poverty but humiliated periodically by debt, discoursing upon biological chemistry years before the scientific world had the imagination to listen—a giant, with dark haunting eyes, long Homeric hair and beard, always brushed back

as if he were eternally facing a hurricane, and a voice and presence as mysteriously impressive as that of some Elijah. Even Brena remembered his affection for her, profound as it was, as being like the affection of some god of mythology directed down upon a beautiful but mortal child.

Between the frivolous sunlight of her mother and the magnificent shadow of her father, Brena grew, acquiring from one a whimsical humor and from the other a calm of high cliffs and of a Parthenon.

According to Brena's own phrase, she "had no childhood and all childhood." She had none because her father, after a month or two of concentrated application of his mind upon studies of similarities in the architecture of ancient Mexico and prehistoric Greece, would find the butcher, landlord and grocer at his door, and then as if awakened he would take his little family and board the train for some minor university where he would teach himself out of debt and into a period of bitterness of heart because neither his learning nor his important place in history were given recognition. With a great sigh from his expansive chest, he would move

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on again in pursuit of some inquiry, some research, some new application of his heroic, impractical head. In consequence, the little girl, red of cheeks, with spindling legs and great wondering brown eyes, never stayed long enough anywhere for acquaintance with children and for play. Tutored by her mother and by the booming, terrifying voice of Demetrius Selcoss when he, as he said, could spare time for it, she learned a taste for books and consumed them according to her own story "like a hungry little pig regardless of the wisdom of a diet and eating all that was within reach." The books served to give her a fake veneer of experience and maturity.

This outer covering was fake because it failed to represent the truth that Brena had reached sixteen, with physical attributes which made men turn as she passed but without any consciousness of having approached womanhood. Without contacts with childhood, ever on the move, living in hotels, in boarding houses, in suburban cottages, ever dependent upon one rickety patched old trunk and her two parents, she had acquired the habits of child-

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like dependence. Like a child she found that life was shaped without intervention of her own. She allowed herself to be dragged along with her mixed load of conceptions drawn from a helter-skelter reading. Among other conceptions was that eternal fiction of the gallant and perfect fairy story prince whose bride she would one day be. To be a bride meant little more in terms of real life than to become an angel.

"If I ever have a daughter," said Brena Selcross, "I will never allow her to have this dangerous dream of a Prince Charming. It is the common foundation upon which girls throw sensible judgment to the four winds and come to critical moments without a thought of the flowing years of real life which are to come. It might have wrecked me when I was seventeen."

While Brena was seventeen, indeed, many landmarks had been set up in her development. Her mother had died quietly in bed the year before without a gasp of warning, without a murmur, a smile upon her engaging lips. Brena had been asleep in the next room, and Demetrius, having one

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of his spells of insomnia, sat almost all night long on the porch of their cottage in Dallas, Texas, in a rocker which squeaked a little as his bulk moved. He had come up at dawn to find his wife, with the first rays of summer sun thrown through the shutters and onto the happy, lifeless figure in bars of gold. It shimmered on her lovely hair; in all the red-gold mass there was not one strand of gray.

"This is the time for great calm," he had said to Brena, as he woke her with his giant's hand upon her shoulder. "The life has gone from your mother's beautiful body, my daughter, but she will live always with us because she was a brave and tender soul which endures forever."

"I thought that she had endless life," he said after a pause, burying his bearded face in his sun-browned hands. "It is the way with me always—I am unprepared—always unprepared."

This was the only flinching brought out in him by the death of the Irish girl he had adored so completely, to whose songs he had listened while his life went askew and in whose smiles he had warmed the chills of bitterness and whose arms had

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stilled the restlessness behind his great dark glowing eyes. He went on his way unchanged, but no doubt making new attempts to reach across the chasm which separated him from the yearning heart of his daughter.

These attempts were failures. Beside each other, when he was home, they were as persons alone; the one reminiscent, living in a past where great figures of history stalked majestically; the other expectant, with the eyes of youth turned away from the shadows and toward the glints of the future.

For three or more years before Mary Vaughn Selcoss had died, she had been alarmed by a new characteristic of her husband. In Dallas when he, who once had known the tang of great deeds done in a setting of romantic grandeur, came out through the hot streets on a common electric car and walked up a suburban avenue with its cheap bungalows and its phonographs, its lawn sprinklers trying to raise the sun-baked grass from the dead, and its concrete sidewalks, Brena's mother had noticed a look in his eyes of a haunting fear.

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"I wonder what would become of you and Brena if anything happened to me," he had said in explanation.

"Nothing will happen to you," Brena's mother had gayly answered. "Come into the house. I've something to show you."

"To show me?"

"Yes—a happy little home with the rent all paid up till last February. Nothing will happen to you."

But the fear was written upon his countenance deeper and deeper, like a tracing often repeated. He said to his wife on one occasion, "You say this fear is new. No, dearest; I have carried it about for many, many years."

Long after her mother had gone Brena had seen that look in her father's eyes.

"Perhaps he is afraid he will lose his place with the oil company," she had said to herself many times.

Opportunity enough was given her in those days to speak to herself. She had gone beyond any school training not only in independence but in learning; nevertheless she remained a child—a



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lonely, sensitive child in the heart of her ripening womanhood. Her father's austerity and her own peculiar shyness made the pair appear to the Texan neighbors aloof, strange, like persons over whom some shadow hung. And her father considered alone? He too, even to her, was in spite of all his giant desire for tenderness, also aloof, strange, and over him some shadow also cast its menacing shape.

Perhaps this shadow was explained when Demetrius, the learned and impractical, the heroic and the humbled exiled gentleman of Athens, stepped in front of a moving train one evening as he was trying to cross the tracks which run through the Dallas streets, and then lay staring up at the sky, his hair and beard brushed back as if he faced a tempest.

It was the doctor who carried the news to Brena. He stood beside the engraving of the Acropolis in its frame battered with many packings and unpackings and many hangings and removals and many journeys in the bottoms of trunks.

"You do not weep?" he inquired.

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"No," said Brena, looking at him with her blanched face.

The doctor was a little dried up Southerner, whose manner straddled between his Kentucky birthright and the Prussian medical schools where he had acquired his education.

"He was a noble man," he said. "He was a haunted man as well."

Brena said nothing.

"If he had lived another six months, he would have been totally blind. Only I knew that. He would tell no one. And what would have supported you both then, eh? The public funds, I reckon."

The woman, who was still a child, shivered.

"He was sorely tempted—your father," said Dr. Gregory. "He had insured his life and he would have killed himself to provide for you. Yes, that was his plan. He asked me about it. Such a man! Hesitating to blow his brains out because of what? Honor. Not to defraud a soulless corporation, eh? Not doing it, either. Too virtuous! Too just! Splendid! Magnificent! Like his own forehead—noble, classic!"

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Brena covered her face with her hands.

"Ah well," said the Doctor, "it was well to know such a man. You must be brave—a good girl, eh? Your father may have been killed in answer to his prayers. One cannot grope his way in front of a moving train."

"Did he die—without—a word?" she asked.

"No; I was going to speak of that," said Gregory, chewing harder than ever on his ever present toothpick. "He was conscious for a time—quite conscious. He said that you never knew how much he loved you—some awkwardness, he said, prevented. He asked me to tell you that something would protect you from danger. He didn't say what. Something would. He said that you must not be afraid."

The Doctor sighed and looked about the room with its few books, pictures, ornaments—the shabby remnants of a life of discriminating taste, high purposes and poverty.

"There isn't much for you to begin on," he said reflectively. "Five hundred life insurance. The rest had gone because he didn't pay the premiums. Too

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honest to take it by blowing his brains out—a noble man—the timbers of a noble human craft deserving better of life's sea!"

He was proud of that phrase.

"I think you will find that Mrs. Wilkie on the corner will take you in for a while," he suggested. "You will find work."

Yes, Brena would find work. The granddaughter of the proud and intellectual Tom Vaughn, the daughter of the man who in America called himself Demetrius Selcoss, once the teacher of chemistry in the National Institution of Greece, who had the right to wear royal decoration and who bore on his body the marks of battles for liberty—she was now merely a girl alone in the world, without friends, money, background, training, experience. A great Democracy had leveled her. Possessed only of that sun-ripened beauty of fruit coming into its prime with untouched bloom upon it, to which was added the charm and the dangers of immaturity and innocence, her assets were a hazard. Her mind and its capacities and its rich supply of academic learning were not currency which passed as legal tender

among the persons she would know. Her father, who had said that he always met life unprepared, might well have added that he left it without provision.

Brena went to live with Mrs. Wilkie.

She remembers that lady as an intensely practical woman who was always in a hurry and who often repeated the phrase, "If one looks after pennies, the dollars will take care of themselves." On haste, she had grown almost unpleasantly stout, and one of the disagreeable memories of Brena's tragic storehouse is the picture of this woman's absurdly small mouth, which would not stay fixed in one spot between her fat cheeks and her fat chin, but moved about, appearing to be located first here and then there, like a newly punched orifice. It never moved so unpleasantly as when she was talking of her ancestry, her relatives who had great wealth and her husband's injustice and brutality in making her give up Society. Her husband had given up her society; he had gone to parts unknown. She brooded upon her fancy that she could have been a kind of dowager grandess if she had been born un-

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der a luckier star or had rejected Sam Wilkie. For the rest, her principal interest was the income from her boarders and a paranoiac aversion to the Romanist Church about which she whispered scandals and accusations in a kind of confidential mania of prevarication, knowing no limit nor restraint.

She would not have been of any particular importance in the life of Brena Selcross had it not been for two facts. One of them was that, lacking other distinction, she could have that of giving refuge at so much and so much for room and board per week to the most alluring young creature that, for the moment, was known to the male eyes of Dallas as an unsolved riddle. The other fact was that she was the half-sister of the mother of Jim Hennepin of Virginia.

## VI

JIM HENNEPIN, who liked to attach to his name the words "of Virginia," was the last of a line which had been brought to American soil by a refugee Huguenot connected distantly with the great explorer of the headwaters of the Mississippi. There are those who remember him in his escapades in Danville, and felt relief when his father, who had himself dissipated the small remainder of the Hennepin wealth and tobacco lands in futile speculations through a Washington broker, said to Jim, "You can go down to your mother's sister in Texas. She will put you up and I have a job all ready for you with a cotton buying and commission house in Dallas. There is nothing left in my own pockets. The only genius you have is for getting into trouble; your only talent is for figures. As time goes on the accountant is playing an ever growing part in American business, just as the drunkard is playing a lesser part. Do you get my meaning, son?"

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This accounted for the presence of Jim Hennepin in Texas. He had been there two years. Compton Parmalee & Co. had found nothing to criticize in his bookkeeping. In fact, it had qualities of genius which sometimes make bookkeeping not only a cold record, but a vitalized inspiration of business. Hennepin was a useful addition to Compton Parmalee's small staff. He drank at the Club, but with a moderation considering his resistance to the effect of alcohol. He was a popular young man in Dallas, and the fact that so many men in that Texas city have now forgotten that they ever heard of this youth is only a commentary upon the truth that the impressions most of us make are not even fine scratches when time's roller has passed once or twice over men's memory and to-day has become so much more important than yesterday and that which is in sight covers that which is gone like new strata in a geological period.

It would be untrue to deny that Jim Hennepin was an attractive figure. If he had craft and viciousness, as some have said he had, it was belied by the Hennepin smile—an inviting smile, invoking



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the cheer of the moment like a smile of a boy. Furthermore he was tall and graceful, like an oarsman in an English college eight. He was more like the bad son of an earl than a bookkeeper, and persons often inquired who he was, especially before they had heard him speak in his care-free modern American slang figures, and were surprised to find that he was older than he looked, had fought his education for several wasted years at the University of Virginia and was earning 'forty-three dollars a week and spending fifty-nine when he was over thirty.

The first time he ever saw Brena Selcoss was one morning when he had come back from a vacation of several weeks at some ranch among the pecan trees in Coleman. His vacations had become a mystery to other young men who were employed; all that appeared necessary was for Jim to go to Compton Parmalee and tell him when he would be back. It was ascribed to his magic quality of persuasion. Some said that if Hennepin smiled and asked in his inviting, breathless manner there would be no surprise to find that the President of

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the United States had allowed him to take the whole of Alaska under the Homestead Act. And yet, though no one in Dallas then knew of it, this was the man of unchecked wild youth, who had beaten a train conductor almost lifeless in the Baltimore station and had killed his riding horse with a stone held in his strong young hand.

Brena was sitting at an early breakfast when he came in. He did not speak to her; he merely stared. After a while, without taking his eyes away from her, he put his gun, his coat and his bag into a chair behind him. He still gazed at her and she, astonished, gazed back. He suggested Apollo; he suggested vaguely the sudden appearance of the fairy prince. He was giving an exhibition of his supreme rudeness—his almost majestic and memorable insolence; but it was also a supreme compliment, the best he knew how to bestow.

"Well," said he at last. "It's springtime."

He spoke as if he had been a messenger from Destiny, as if Spring were Brena's time and that time had come.

It was like a sentence of a court.

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With a quirk about the corners of his mouth, he walked boldly toward her and looked down into the dish of cereal on the table beneath her eyes.

"Nothing but milk," said he. "No, by God, you shan't have milk on your rice! It's an outrage. You are the young queen and I am the Captain of the Palace Guards. And I'm off in a borrowed motor car to get you the richest, thickest pint of cream in the city, and the speed laws can't stop me."

This absurd young man, with his infant smile, his athlete's body and his elementary hungers, leaped out down the steps, into a new touring car in which he had come, cut out the muffler and was gone.

He came back with cream. His aunt said, "Jim, you are crazy." But he was not crazy. He had an instinct for creating romance; he made the illusion when he wished because he had learned that adventures, particularly those with women, failed or succeeded according to the distance from the humdrum world he could lead on as a guide into the tropical and gaudy-flowered jungle of Change.

He became Brena's knight. He said so himself. He told her that for her to contemplate going to

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work was absurd—it was an impropriety like feeding American beauty roses to army mules. Brena laughed and went to work one Monday morning; but Jim Hennepin had struck the right note when he had told her he would be her knight. She said, "I do like knights—not for myself, because I am so healthy."

"Yes, you burst with it," he said, looking at her forehead, her throat, her wrists. "It is my distraction."

"Nevertheless I like knights because they are knights."

"I am the originator of the knight idea," he said. "Somebody has told you it was King Arthur or some one else. Mere plagiarism! Come with me this evening on a ride to Waco."

He took her everywhere and his aunt scowled.

"Jim, she is only seventeen," Mrs. Wilkie said, panting.

"She looks twenty-five," he answered.

"But it leads nowhere," said the aunt. "Nowhere except to scandal."

"Scandal?" replied Hennepin yawning. "Non-

sense! Also piffle! A man takes a beautiful girl around for the same reason that you'd wear a diamond tiara if you had one, especially if it had been given you by some broker. It's just a symbol of one's ability to have the right things. It's ego."

"Is that all, Jim?"

"Yes," he said, lying glibly.

"Because you haven't the money to be married, Jim," she said, moving her little mouth over so that it looked like a newly-punctured pink opening. She liked to live near immorality; it gave her vicarious pleasure. She had a magazine picture of a certain French actress tacked up beside her looking-glass. She would have been sorry if Brena had suffered misfortune from Jim, but also she would have been glad just as one, though sorry to hear of a distant acquaintance dying, has a thrill of interest in finding a familiar name in the obituary notices.

Hennepin was whimsical enough to repeat to Brena, word for word, this conversation.

They were sitting in the motor car looking out over the undulating Texas prairie. In the hollows

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the red bud was in bloom and the air of dusk was like the light, velvety.

"It never occurred to her that I might love you," he said.

Brena said nothing.

"Don't you love me a little?" he asked.

"I don't know, Jim—really, I don't know. I don't know what love is. I've only read about it, and it is just like reading about some place you've never been. I wouldn't know when I had arrived there and stood on the very spot."

"My God, you're like a new flower, opened up for the first time and wet with dew!"

As if he could not conceal haste, he seized her hand and squeezed it until she said, "Oh, Jim!"

"Well, you're fond of me?"

"Yes, I am, Jim. I'm fond of you."

"Perhaps it's because you have no one else to be fond of," he suggested.

"I don't know," she told him. "I don't know yet."

He looked around at the yellow horizon in the West and shivered.

"We aren't by ourselves," he exclaimed with irritation. "Not here in Dallas. We ought to take a trip."

"A trip!" said Brena. "How could we take a trip?"

"You mean because of money? Well, I'm going to fix that." He smiled craftily. "I've a strangle hold on some money, Brena. I suppose that when I turn up with some real money people will say that I dipped into the till or had a rich uncle die. It will be such a novelty to have a roll. But they'll be wrong. I'll get it my own way. And it's coming."

"Oh, Jim!"

"Money or no money, I want you," he said. "Some day I'll make you say you love me."

Brena lay awake under a hot roof wondering whether she loved Jim Hennepin. There was no one to tell her that she did not.

As the weeks went on she found herself, asking where the end would be of day after day of showing perfumed wives of Dallas business men embroidered linens at the Porto Rican store, of walk-

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ing home, sometimes with men staring at her, of trying to find interest in the chocolate fudge minds of girls who did not like to have her around because she talked like a professor and wore the beauty they wished was theirs. It was not clear that Jim was not the one man of all, the prince who stepped out of nothing and held out his hands to her in some kind of miraculous tableau. No one reminded her that she was only seventeen; she felt that she was as old as the pyramids, for her reading had made her appear as related to the past. More than anything else some fundamental part of her declared that she was as nothing, that whatever she might do or become there could be no disaster, no loss; that she was created to be given away.

One day Jim came home at the noon hour. He did not usually come then, and evidently he had not come to have lunch there, for he stood outside the door where his aunt's piggy eyes could not see him, and beckoned to Brena mysteriously.

When she had come out onto the porch, he took her hand and led her around the corner of the house. She could always remember the heat of the



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blazing sun of noon which flattened its burning upon them as if it were some great wrath.

"Look here!" said Jim, with a kind of ferocity in his voice and eyes. "I'm going away. Compton Parmalee won't be in Dallas, and I've an errand to do."

"You're so excited, Jim."

"Yes, I know. But the time has come. I want to know if you love me."

He did not appear to care much what her answer would be.

"I think I do, Jim."

"You're willing to take a trip? Brave enough to go to St. Louis alone? To meet me?"

"You mean you want to marry me, Jim?"

"Why yes, if it turns out all right."

"I'll go."

"Brave enough?"

"I'm not much of a coward, Jim—that least of all."

"Well, then—listen. Here's a hotel. The name is written on that card. Be there on Friday, the

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twelfth of the month. I'll be there at four o'clock. You better come the day before. Get a room and don't be frightened."

"No, Jim."

"Why do you look at me so?"

"Because I have no money now."

"That's all right. Here, take this. It's plenty, eh? Don't let any one see it. And you won't say——"

"Of course not, Jim—not anything."

"Your hand on that."

She put her hand in his.

"Why are you going away, Jim?"

He looked into her eyes, and if Brena had known the world better, she would have seen something of the brutality of Jim Hennepin at that moment.

"Tell me, Jim."

"I've had a call," he said craftily. "If I can tell you when I come for you in St. Louis you'll say that it is all the strangest—— Well, I've had a call."

Brena went to St. Louis. She had not marked the date on her little calendar on the bureau; it was



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not necessary because she was not ready to forget,  
and besides some one might ask her a question.  
Some one might have asked why she went. And  
she could not have told.



## VII

BRENA SELCOSS returned from St. Louis on the sixteenth of the month.

The train arrived in Dallas in the early morning when the night prairie wind was still cool but she spent the last dollar in her purse to be driven to Mrs. Wilkie's in one of the old city station hacks.

"Well!" said the round landlady exploding the breath from her little mouth to express astonishment, inquiry and disapproval all at once.

"Yes, I came back," Brena replied lifting her suit case up the steps wearily.

"I thought I was going to lose all my nice young people," Mrs. Wilkie said, turning on the disc record of her false good nature. "Jim Hennepin went with hardly a thank you. There's been no end of mail for him. I didn't know where he'd gone; he made such a mystery about it, so I sent the letters to his office. They probably know about him—more than I do. He didn't tell you where he went?"

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"No," said Brena, "he didn't tell me."

"And not a word from him. Not so much as a picture postcard."

Brena was trying to pass around the bulk of the older woman.

"And you went off yourself without much explanation," Mrs. Wilkie complained, putting herself in the way, "and without knowing whether or not you was coming back."

She looked all over the girl from head to foot with an expression in her beady eyes indicating that it would have been better if a legal guardian had been appointed for Brena.

"Well, I'm here."

"So I see. Have you had breakfast?"

"I don't want any," replied Brena.

She went up to her room under the roof where upon the bedspread were the dust marks made by her suit case when she had thrown it up to pack six days before. She put it back on those marks as if a round of life had been completed; wearily she opened it and the first object she took out was a piece of soap, done up neatly in a wrapper with

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violets in a wreath around the legend, "Made expressly for this Hotel." She held it for a long time in her hand, staring down at it. Then she got up to cross the room to the picture of the Acropolis—her father's picture, the last possession of the family. For a long time too she looked at this engraving in its travel-battered frame—a relic of Demetrius Selcoss.

"He said not to be afraid," she told herself. "He said something would come if I were in danger."

Downstairs at about that same moment Mrs. Wilkie was writing in her diary. At one time in her life she had acquired the fancy that the memoirs of women often were important—the original sources of historical facts and the mirror of society of a period—and the diary habit kept its grip upon her long after she had ceased to say to herself, "Think what it would have meant if Madame de Maintenon had kept a diary!" Now she wrote in the same hasty, out-of-breath style with which she conducted all life—leaving out pronouns and writing sentences. "Went shopping. Saw Bertha.

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Said her husband's teeth kept her awake getting hot water bottle."

She poised her fountain pen and wrote: "Brena Selcross returned to-day from St. Louis. Said she had errand there. There is a frightened look in her eyes." A drop of ink fell and spattered out. She blotted it and left the outline of a little black fiend which danced upon the page.

It may have been true that Brena had in her great dark eyes a frightened look but there was nothing to show panic in her conduct. For a girl who was not yet eighteen she exhibited a great deal of common sense. She went back to the Porto Rican shop and asked for her old position. It was given to her and life was renewed again in a pulsing monotony of that slightly-soiled middle-class respectable vulgarity which appeared to Brena as infinitely more sordid than the squalor of slums or the crises of passionate crimes. That she was a part of this dull brown cheapness, surrounded by virtuous and smug persons who lived contentedly without ideas or taste in a round of interest in such things as strawberry festivals, new hats, pink

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celluloid hair-receivers, Sunday newspapers, half pounds of chocolates, card games, etiquette, napkin-rings, the domestic lives of actresses and royalty, souvenir spoons, picture postal cards, talking machines, baseball scores, spiritualism, and decorated sentiments or vulgarities framed for the wall, was an anomaly like planting a peony among the cabbages.

But Brena, conscious of this, found herself wondering whether every human being did not have the feeling that he or she was a gem in an inferior setting. Her mother's sense of humor was in her and she saw her escape not by fluttering at the walls but by climbing them. Even at seventeen, no doubt her face had begun to take on that calm of centuries with its tenderness and patience and wistfulness and understanding as if she carried eternal hopes and bore the sufferings of all mankind; it was only her mother's sense of humor that thrust its light through this mountainous and heroic expression. Later the punctuation of fear, expressed only through her eyes, had become a characteristic interruption.




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Mrs. Wilkie often mentioned the journey to St. Louis. She would have given Brena a week's board to know why the girl had gone, but even Mrs. Wilkie sensed some quality in this beautiful child which made her a creature of a different species and filled others with a sense of awe from which only Jim Hennepin had been exempt; she never pressed her questions beyond a point where she found herself looking into the wondering, dark Selcross eyes. Brena kept her own knowledge without an effort; it was done with a magnificent restraint and with the suggestion that she who until that year had navigated life not at all would hereafter navigate it for a long time without another's hand upon the tiller.

Brena even asked twice whether Hennepin had written. She chose moments when the two other women boarders and the accountant of the Southern Pacific were at the table.

"Written!" said Mrs. Wilkie puckering her little mouth as if she were going to whistle her sentence. "Written? Not he! But I might expect that; I



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have never found that I could expect gratitude—from anybody.”

She looked at each face at the table severely.

“But that’s nothing,” she added. “His own father who is dying of Bright’s hasn’t heard from him—not for three months.”

“Oh,” said Brena as if reflecting and weighing the matter. She left the table and going into the front room she played in lively time upon the piano there—a piano with a sheeny red case and with a tone intended to be the startling opposite of the tin-pan attributes of old pianos. This one had tones extravagantly round like the softness of an elocutionist reading poetry. Brena had remembered this piano and described its affectation. It was nothing to her that those who heard her play on it said, “Oh!—She makes it talk,” for they were the same persons who said, “What beautiful flowers! They’re like wax!”

Brena at the piano that evening felt as she always felt, that she was alone in her world—the friend of certain dogs and cats which lived in houses along the way home from work. She had grown

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accustomed to this loneliness and was nearly convinced subconsciously that it would go on forever. Within sight there was nothing which might break into it and she had no pangs because of that. She envied no one unless it were the unidentified young wife who lived in the green bungalow on the corner of Deering Street and had appeared a few weeks before, pale and transparent and smiling with a baby in her arms. Brena set her face toward to-morrows. She might have been expected, therefore, to be startled when the past broke in upon her.

It came in the form of Compton Parmalee.

Brena had been writing in her hot room under the roof. It was still hot although the Texas Fall had come and Brena with her sleeves rolled back from her shapely young arms with their cream-colored skin had been bending over her little table trying to set down in the form of a written drama the story of the one other girl who worked now in the Porto Rican Embroidery store. The story was not as dramatic a story as it may have appeared to Brena at seventeen. Nor could Brena have written a play because she had no knowledge whatever of

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the craft of writing plays, which she later found out is a matter of skilled carpentry and not inspired, as Brena had conceived it. For all of this she now asks to be forgiven since every one, usually in extreme youth, writes a play and nearly every one, as Brena, startled and surprised at the secret labor, thrusts the manuscript into a drawer when a knock comes.

It was Mrs. Wilkie.

"Well!" she said, exploding her usual astonishment, inquiry and disapproval in one puffed word.

Brena smiled.

"You better put yourself to rights!" said the landlady, holding the edge of the varnished yellow door.

"You better dress your best! You've got a caller."

"To see me?"

"Yes, to see you. And such a caller! It's Mr. Parmalee!"

Brena stiffened. She asked: "What does he want to see me for?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Wilkie admitted. "I certainly wish I did. He has oodles of money! He

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speculated during this year and he's made a fortune!"

"I will go down just as I am," said Brena calmly and firmly. "I do not care about his fortune, Mrs. Wilkie. I want to find out what he wants of me."

Compton Parmalee did not appear at all anxious to say what he wanted. He was a small, wiry man, careful of his dress, who above everything else was self-contained. He thrust his glances. As Brena Selcross came in the door he thrust a glance at her and then looked up at the ceiling as if his mind was digesting that which his gray eyes had photographed. As she came toward him inquiringly he rose, thrust another glance at her and looked out the window considering. When she stopped he thrust once more and sat down looking at the carpet. Every one who ever knew Compton Parmalee will remember the characteristic inspection of that daring speculator.

"Are you Miss Selcross?" he asked as if now that he was able to fasten his gaze upon her, he found it improbable that the girl he saw in all her freshness of youth was the girl he had come to see.

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"Yes," she said.

No one ever understood where Parmalee had acquired the judicial manner that he wore around his daring as one wears the robes of an office for which one holds no title.

He had come to Texas from the desert country of Southern California when he was twenty-six. He knew that country well. In his years in Dallas, acting as a cotton commission man and commodity gambler, he had collected a large and valuable library about the whole historic Southwest, its Indian tribes, the Pueblos, the strange customs and secrets of savage men carrying some of the traits and traditions of prehistoric Aztecs, and the Jesuit missionaries. It was said by some persons that his quiet ways were a veneer put on by some studious years in Berkeley at the University, but rumor had it that Parmalee with his rather pale, young face that made him look thirty instead of forty-three, his small, well-shaped hands, his immaculate linen, his soft voice, had once shot a man across a roulette table which he himself owned and operated.

That he was ever a man of violence is very doubt-

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ful. He was an unquivering gambler but not with his personal safety; his personal safety was his principal concern. He wore gloves on all occasions—to keep the germs off his hands; he had his massive mahogany desk, in the office building across from the new hotel, wiped down every morning with an antiseptic; long years before the practice had become a worthy fashion he had himself examined periodically by specialists. He was always fearing contagion. He gargled. He snuffed. He sprayed. He read medical journals. He feared cancer above all other things. He loved his life so much that he had loved no woman for many years; the monopoly of this devotion excluded competition. He loved his life with an unending passion; he ruined it by fearing to lose it.

This was the man who withheld his questions, bided his time and gazed at Brena Selcross with frank admiration on his absurdly youthful and academic face. He turned away from her, walked to the window and looked out at the night, at the wall of the neighboring house upon which the light of the full moon was bluish white, and then like an

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actor who has rehearsed the part of a cool and collected man he walked toward Brena and said clearly and calmly, "I've come for information."

He could not see the slightest quiver in the girl's eyes, though he looked for it.

"Yes," said he. "May I close this door?"

Mrs. Wilkie, who was outside pretending to read the names in the telephone book, saw the front room door gently swing to and heard the latch.

"How old are you?" Parmalee was asking Brena.

"Eighteen this month," she said.

"Well, that's surprising—very indeed," he said.

"You are more of a woman than a girl."

Brena was not pleased by the patronizing manner of this rich cotton man. She said promptly:

"The information you wanted? Was it about me?"

Parmalee looked up with a single sharp thrust of his glance; he adjusted his tie and his opinion of Miss Selcoss at one time. He put upon his unwrinkled clean-shaven face a typical ingratiating smile. He took his pointed chin, which combined with his upslanting eyebrows to give him a satanic



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expression, not unpleasing, in his small white cold hand.

He said: "Oh, no, the information I seek is about a certain man."

She glanced around her quickly as if to be sure that no one else had come with him and was sitting outside the circle of radiance from the gas mantle that made the faces of human beings suddenly turn livid and ghastly as Parmalee's had turned and as she felt her own had turned.

"Yes. You want me to be more specific," he said in a low voice. "I will be. The man is——"

He stopped, simulating perhaps a reluctance to speak the name.

Brena held her breath.

"Jim Hennepin," he said. "An employee or perhaps a better word is associate."

Without a flutter in her dark eyes, Brena said:

"Oh, then you do not want to see me—you want to see Mr. Hennepin's aunt—Mrs. Wilkie."

Parmalee shook his head from side to side. "Perhaps we'd better sit down," he suggested.

Her face flushed as she told him that she would

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prefer to stand, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

"Has she heard from him?" he asked. "To-day?"

"No," said Brena, "she hasn't had a line from him since he left Dallas. There isn't anything—at the office?"

"No, his accounts are all right," replied Parmalee. "It appears that you are anxious on that point—in his behalf. Are you fond of him?"

"Not in the slightest." Brena answered with a voice which showed no emotion whatever: she might have been asked whether she liked cold raw sliced tomatoes.

"Well, that's surprising—very, indeed," he said with a thrust of his glance. "You were friendly?"

"Yes," she said. "I suppose that we were very friendly. I do not know why you are asking me these questions."

"That will appear," he said gravely. "You will see that I am your friend in this, Miss Selcoss. I think you will say that I came here to do you a service."

For just a flick of time something rose from the

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depths of Compton Parmalee and Brena saw it. It was almost an effluvium of the buried best in him—the stir of a dying thing trying to come to life. It was half a benevolent love of fellow man: half the call of an isolated, warped and lonely soul. It was the thing which she saw later and to which she gave in her folly, but now it flickered for a moment on that strange æsthetic gambler's face and was gone.

"You telegraphed to Jim Hennepin from St. Louis," he said. "That telegram was opened."

"When?" asked Brena. "When it came? Of course."

He did not deny it. He said: "It was just your message, 'I am waiting,' and it was signed, 'B'. It took a little inquiry for me to know that this telegram was probably sent by you."

"But nearly five months have gone."

"I know."

"And why now do you come to me?"

"You needn't tell me anything you do not wish to tell. I assume that you arranged to meet him in St. Louis."

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Brena put her hand up and felt her throat. It was hot—the skin was hot under her cold hand.

"It was a great mistake," she said in a low voice, "—a great mistake."

"The idea was marriage?"

"It was my idea—if I had any clear idea."

"You were very young."

"Yes, I think so—looking back."

"You know now what was in Jim Hennepin's mind?"

She did not answer.

"The dirty dog!" said Parmalee. "What a smiling face he had!"

Brena shuddered.

"Well, here is the telegram," said the visitor. "I opened it myself. There is no one else who knows it was ever sent."

He wet his thin lips; he said:

"It is a secret—ours," and stretched out his hand with the yellow envelope held daintily in his fingers.

The girl, however, was looking searchingly into his eyes; she was young but not too young to be

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suspicious of a secret shared by two, when one treats that secret as if it were a kind of asset.

Apparently he read her thoughts, for he said hurriedly, "You needn't feel under any obligation to me for keeping that secret. I have my stains and blights but they are not of that kind. As I said all I came for was information."

She took the telegram which he had held toward her and nodded.

"Of course, if he were to meet you he probably told you more. He probably told you where he was going, eh—and why?"

He leaned forward as he asked this question and turned one side of his face as if the answer could best be heard by his right ear alone.

"No," she said. "He spoke of making a great sum of money, of getting it from some place."

"He did not say where?"

"No."

Parmalee sighed as if he had gone up a blind alley and had found its end.

"He spoke of some call—some message," said Brena.

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The broker's eyes widened until they were in a staring distention.

"Ha! So he did! What did he tell you?"

"Nothing."

Parmalee sat down in a chair and stared at the carpet for a long time.

"It is very peculiar," he said at last. "He left you to meet him in St. Louis. He went on an errand of some strange kind and refused to tell you what it was. Well! Well! And then you waited in St. Louis—in vain."

"How did you know he didn't come?"

"Your telegram."

Brena said: "I was there three days. I waited. I was frightened. But I grew more in those three days than I have ever grown before in three years."

"Yes," said Parmalee with a flicker of tenderness again. "I can understand."

"You have heard no word from him since?"

"No word. And I thought that it might be my duty to tell——"

"No, no, no!" exclaimed the man, jumping up. "If there is any duty in the world it is not to tell."

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Few would ever understand—as I understand. It would do no good. If I can do nothing, what purpose would it serve for you to try? For God's sake think of yourself."

"And I promised him," she said. "What difference does it make that I see clearly now what a man he is—my promise to keep silent."


"Quiet!" commanded Parmalee. "Not so loud. No purpose is served by stirring up a search."

"A search? You mean that you do not know where he is, Mr. Parmalee?"

The broker lowered his voice: "Yes," said he. "Not only have you and Mrs. Wilkie heard nothing and his father heard nothing, but I have heard nothing. Apparently after he had decided to take you away from Dallas this thing described as a call came."

"Yes."

"There is still a balance of a considerable sum to his credit in the office. I will tell you confidentially that he has not claimed it. As far as I can find out no man, woman or child for nearly half a year has seen Jim Hennepin. No one misses him to be sure.



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And for you to sacrifice yourself—that would be utter folly! He has gone—like this!”

Parmalee held up his small clenched fist, opened it suddenly and blew an imaginary speck of dust from its palm into oblivion.



## VIII

MIDWINTER had come before Brena saw Compton Parmalee again. He sent for her two days after Christmas; he asked if she could come to his office.

The call had come over the telephone to the store where she was still employed and Brena answered that she would try to leave an hour earlier than usual so that she could come at four.

Winter dusk had begun to settle over the city before she was shown into the broker's inner office by a stenographer, who, never having seen a woman caller before, raised her eyebrows as she closed the door after the entrance of this beautiful stranger. Through the great plate glass windows of the luxurious office Brena could see the flaming sunset in the West and against it, in dark outline, the figure of Parmalee who had risen as she had come in.

With a gesture of gallantry he took her furs from her and put them across the white papers on

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his desk and when she sat down he touched these furs caressingly for several moments. He might have been thrusting his glances at her, but she could not tell. Dusk had entered the office, too, and he became only a figure of two dimensions, without thickness, from which after a moment there came a voice which Brena scarcely recognized, so weary was it and yet so unrelaxed and tense.

"You are sure that all you told me was accurate," he said.

She needed no explanation; she said at once, "Of course," in a tone of indignation.

"I know," said he. "But there was just one more thing. Did he leave a paper with you?"

"A paper? No, he left no paper. He gave me——"

She hesitated and went on. "He gave me some money and there was a little scrap of paper in it. I remember because I did not know whether to keep it or throw it away. He might have wanted it. It had on it an arrow drawn with ink and a lizard drawn beside it and two words underneath, 'This sign.'"

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"Well, that was nothing," said Parmalee. "Where is it now?"

"It disappeared. You haven't——"

"No. Not a word. He has gone."

She was silent.

"In fact, it was not because of anything to do with it that I wanted to see you," the man said. "You will say when you know why I sent for you that you have never heard of anything like it in all your life."

Brena sat down.

"Did you ever hear of a man who had made a final killing—who a year ago was juggling riches and insolvency in one hand and success or failure in the other, wanting to talk about himself to an eighteen-year-old orphan?"

"No," she said with a little laugh. "I never heard of that."

"I sent for you to tell you about myself—not about what I have been—but about what I am. I did this after having seen you once and once only. It is because there was a sympathy between us that was most extraordinary—more than you know."

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"I think I understand."

"It is not love," said he. "Let me make it plain that I am not deluded, that I am not in love with you. You will never hear me talking about the love of youth. I am not old, but the passion and idealism of love have gone—worn out perhaps in taking risks and jarring to pieces within while like a carved marble on the outside. No, I will not make love to you."

"No," said Brena giving affirmation.

He played with the furs a little more.

"Ten months ago I scraped together all the money I could and I threw it into a final play. That's neither here nor there. I am now worth a little over two million dollars, I am through with business, with trading, with speculation, with this office, and with Dallas, Texas—forever!"

"And now——?" asked Brena.

He laughed. "That is it!—What?" The fur stole on the desk in front of him he smoothed gently with his open hand. Brena made no suggestion as to what he should do with his life, and after a moment he went on, "There is left to me now col-

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lecting books, travel, perhaps an opportunity to do some one a kindness now and then and taking good care of my health. I shall buy a painting occasionally. Can you think of anything else?"

To Brena the problem was new; she did not have a ready answer.

"I have burned out," said Parmalee. "I am ashes."

Of this he spoke cheerfully as if he had repeated it over and over to himself until it had lost its blackness and now gave the strange pleasure that all final conclusions of human limitations and disasters give at last when they are accepted.

"You see I am not a great man," he explained. "It was necessary for me to throw all of myself into the fight—every resource I could summon. I do not smoke. I know as much about smoking as any man alive. I have measured its effect with accuracy. It is a greater devitalizer than alcohol. But I do not drink, either. I have conserved and guarded all my sensations until I have none. All my life—my last twenty years of life—I have promised myself indulgences—indulgences of gigantic

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and exquisite design, but now that I can have them, this body of mine rejects them all, refuses them all. Fate laughs in my ear and says, 'You're done for. The most sensuous pleasure you shall have will be the flavor of that apple sauce you have eaten for lunch for fifteen years and will eat for lunch for the rest of your days.' Isn't this a grim joke, Miss Selcoss?"

"I do not know," said Brena uneasily.

Even in the dark he sensed her desire to go.

"Don't leave me," he said with a voice which almost broke into a low sob. "You are the only one who can understand."

"All right," she said, astonished that she had become important to any one. "I'm sorry, Mr. Parmalee."

"Let me tell you something else," he went on. "I have dreamed of a certain prestige—a kind of background of life that I would enjoy when I was ready. To that end I have given liberally to campaign funds. Next year if I wish I can be Minister to Portugal. Personally I think this is a grim jest. It is the system, however."

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Brena clasped her ungloved hands in her lap and thrust her arms out until it appeared that she was expressing something of the thrill of imagination which the picture of diplomatic life in a European capital had given her.

"But I shall not take the office," said Parmalee.

Brena uttered an exclamation.

"No, I shall not take it. I do not want more brilliance. I want more dim light. I like the dusk. I do not want to see my name in printed letters. I never want to see it again. I do not want men and women to say, 'That is Compton Parmalee.' I want all strangers to neglect me. I want to live in a dim light—like this—now in this office."

He sighed.

"I've made many mistakes," he said. "I want now to become buried, to be unseen—like a ghost."

Brena protested; she said, "No, no, you don't want that."

Parmalee did not answer and the silence and the dusk invited the girl to speak.

"There are so many things you can buy with your money," she said.

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"Only one," he replied sharply.

"And that——"

"Is you."

She pushed her chair back from the desk with both her hands.

"You need not be alarmed," said his calm voice. "I have stated it purposely at its worst. It is better for you to have this thought presented at first and perhaps we can overcome it later. I put it in the terms the world will use; Dallas will say, 'He bought her.' But, after all, we will not be in Dallas. We will be in Pekin or in Bombay or in sight of the Pyramids or in the crags of the Norway coast. I am more than twenty years older than you are. But the varied and interesting and important persons with whom we may dine will only say, 'He has a beautiful young wife with a free mind. Her father was a patriot of Greece.'"

"You know——"

"All that I could about you," said Parmalee.

"But it has been a long time," Brena said, as if cross-examination might bring clarity to displace her puzzled mind. "You did not——"



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"Come back?" he asked. "No."

Outside the plate glass window the rising wind tuned mournfully.

"You are very young," he said. "You would not foresee as I foresaw that I could not see you without starting the tongues of scandal. You are penniless, young, working. I am rich, worldly, conspicuous. I should have liked to send you extravagant presents. You would not have understood. You would have thought I was an old fool trying to be a lover. I was not that, but the others would have said even worse of me. So I waited, clinging to a single strand that brings us together."

"Us!"

"Yes—sympathy. Because you saw in me the one thing left that you might salvage and find valuable. Not because I am a man and you are a woman, but because I am a human being and you, who can see with a vision of the gods, saw in my ashes one unburned thing."

"You knew!"

"Yes, I knew," he said sadly. "No one else could see. Underneath there is something left—a kind

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of tenderness for humanity. It is to fan this spark that I want to buy you."

Brena said nothing; he had made good his promise that he would tell her something she had never heard of before.

"I do not want a wife," he said. "That would be the title, but I do not want a wife. It is too late. I want a mother. I want you to make my spirit clean and white as it was when I was ten."

"And yet," said Brena, "you do not think of me."

Suddenly this unhappy man rose to his feet trembling, intense, gesticulating.

"Think of you," he said. "How can you say that I have not thought of you? Is this thing I propose so unnatural as the foolish world has said of it? Is it base of me to want to take a diamond from the mud where no one else has seen it? Is it an ugly thought that I feel repulsion when I see you, who are made of the rarest materials, wasted upon cheap labors and cheap garish surroundings and being worn down like a fine, wonderful machine, abused by coarse use? Am I a fool to believe that with the only contacts available to you, you will only

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meet the vulgar men you can never marry? Did I not see that you had a vision as from Olympic heights which was being blinded in this routine of middle-class horrors?"

Brena's face, upon which the last light fell, was white and frightened as if she had seen a ghost. It was enough to tell him that she knew that he spoke truly.

"I do not ask you to give anything to me except your help to make me new again," he said. "I do not ask young love. I have none to give. I cannot take you away or keep you near me without marriage. It would blast us both. But if you marry me you shall be made free whenever the day comes that you wish to go. I ask no promises."

Brena got up and stood looking out the window. The tall office building overlooked not only the old center of the city and the red angular prisms of brick and the square roofs laid out like fields upon level farmland, but also the distant stretches of rolling prairies. There was an impulse to go over that distant horizon: the same strong impulse of youth, adventure, ambition that runs like a current

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in the blood of animals and men. To be free! To grow! To range! To know! To be emancipated from the sordid round of days!

"Do not answer now," said Parmalee. "I have said all I can. It has taken me several weeks to plan how I should say this. I have said it all in a cold, fair statement. No one could say I had made love to you, Brena."

She took his hand; it was as cold as ice.

"Write me," said he brusquely.

A week later he got her letter: it was on his desk apart from the business envelopes. He tore it open.

"Nothing you said to me can be denied," she wrote. "You have inquired about me; I have no hesitation in telling you that I have inquired about you. I do not feel that I have gained anything by my inquiry, for it is true that there comes to me at strange moments a clear vision and an insight. I think you are above all honorable."

Parmalee must have uttered an exclamation of triumph; he alone knew that she was wrong.

"I want to make my life of greater service than

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it can ever be here. I am impatient for a richer soil in which to grow. I am willing to help you, too, if I can. It seems a little vague to me how I can do this and yet, though I am very young, I can live in you—I can feel all that you feel and I can see the better part of you.”

He probably thrust a glance at the letter and looked up with that satanic chin and upslanting eyes turned toward the ceiling and with the judicial smile upon his mouth. He read on.

“Therefore I assent to your plan as you stated it. Always yours, Brena Selcoss.”

Parmalee, no doubt, said to himself that this was no ordinary letter from the hand of a girl not older than eighteen, the brevity and the calm of it were symbolized somewhat by the direct and graceful handwriting which, with breadth of line and easy flow, none the less stood architecturally upon the page.

They were married one evening at 8 o'clock in the same room in which he had first seen her. Mrs. Wilkie was glad to have her “home” as she called it the center of an unscheduled social event which

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would start all the tongues when it was in the *News* the next morning. This was the nearest she could come to the adventure of a duchess and she was willing to have the flurry in her life. It would be she who would give out the interviews and explain grandly over the telephone. They—the two—would be on their way to that fairy world of money and travel and airs and graces which had opened its arms to this fated young beauty. The girl would leave all her old life and its worn dresses and cheap shoes behind—all but one thing perhaps, and that would be the picture of the Acropolis in its battered frame. The fortune that had befallen Brena had been the very reality of all of Mrs. Wilkie's life-long dreams, but she considered that for herself, there would be certain crumbs fallen from the table. She caught her breath: she had almost lost it when she had learned from Parmalee that he was giving the bride a check for one hundred thousand dollars.

Not fifteen minutes had elapsed after the marriage before there came into the lives of the two a new element.

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They had been whirled to the station and were strolling up and down as casually as if he were dictating to a young secretary the last memoranda of a deal in cotton.

Little by little his conversation fell away; he muttered a few last absent-minded words and it was gone altogether. He walked on; she kept pace with him. He walked on in silence.

Not until she heard a strange whiffling noise as a sudden sucking in of breath of one who has fainted did she turn.

"You are as white as linen," she said trembling.

He wet his lips and looked at her almost snarling.

"What is this fate that follows you?" he asked.

"Fate?"

"Something."

"Why? What do you feel?" she asked in a frightened whisper.

"I feel fear," he said, his upper lip fluttering, "a horrible, unaccountable terror."

## IX

THE extraordinary transition in Compton Parmelee began with his marriage.

Apparently an inexplicable fear had seized him within a few minutes; inexplicable fear little by little took possession of his life and made him a source of the contagion of unreasoning dread.

There was a six-month period after the departure of the strange bride from Dallas wherein, whatever emotions of apprehension he may have felt, a struggle was made to conceal them and to fulfill his bargain to give Brena Selcross the variety, content and luxury that he had said should be hers. He, who never had more than touched her hand with his own cold, refined fingers, sometimes burst forth with all the zealous energy he had put into his speculations and with all the assurance in his own mystic powers of foresight which had made him a great gambler.



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"You are my speculation now!" he would exclaim. "I have bought a future in you!"

Brena would stare back at him, her great dark eyes questioning and full of doubt.

"You think I have done badly? No. It was my one great inspiration. You have the body and the health of one among thousands. You are so beautiful with the beauty of eternal things that even I who will not touch your cheek can feel the same thrill of pleasure that one may feel gazing upon a Praxiteles."

She had said, "Not Phidias, then?"

"Yes, Phidias—a work of Phidias! Because there is not only your carved limbs and neck and hands but something sublime as well. Beneath your warm and velvety surface like the texture of flower petals there is a wonderful mind, and a spirit which has come down through eternities with immortal life."

"You are an eloquent man," the young girl had said, with a quirk upon her lips suggestive of her mother. "Your tongue is as silvery as those of my Irish ancestors."

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"Do you think I shall regret that I have played a part in your growth?" he had asked, with one of his short laughs. "I shall not be more to you than I am now. How can I use you, eh? How could I use my money? I deluded myself once. I thought I wanted it for myself. But you? I do not want you for myself. I only want your capacity as a woman to be filled to the brim!"

He lived two lives; not at the same time, but alternately. The one was in her; the other in himself. When he could put his own life into hers he forgot his own. He became that being whose warmth and light she had seen beneath the cold steel shell of an unrelenting fighter and plunger, whose singleness of purpose and will had found dynamic concentration in his spare body and had expressed themselves in a mask of cruelty and craft upon a face otherwise æsthetic and sensitive. At these times his countenance wore that abnormal youth of feature which was his most marked personal characteristic. It was only upon rare occasions that it was twisted up as if in a cramp of anxiety; as if some distant but menacing forecast had pointed a

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finger at him from afar. For a moment he forgot her; for a moment he had been immersed in his self.

For more than half a year, in Paris, in Budapest, in Petrograd, in London, this one of the two lives of Compton Parmalee was dominant. Something of the youth and the calm of Brena's eyes, looking out upon a world which opened all its doors to her expectant inquiry, was reflected in his own.

By manipulation of acquaintance and, when necessary, by lavish expenditure, he procured her entry into rare social circumferences. In that first year Brena, considered by all strangers to be several years older than she, in fact, was, and of whom no one would have believed it if it had been told them that she had been plucked out of that kitchen garden of Wilkie's boarding house, the Porto Rican Shop, the movies, and a sordid sickly-brown provincialism, had dined with foreign ambassadors, hunted with Lady Tremayn Nash, been courted over, through and under her disgust by a cousin of the ex-King of the Portuguese, occupied a villa in the Italian lakes and voyaged in a luxurious yacht around the Baltic

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in midsummer with the family of Stockholm's largest banker. With the credit of admiration that her natural poise, her beauty, her talent as a linguist, her mother's wit and her father's love of learning had brought her everywhere, she was not dazzled in the slightest degree.

When Parmalee, in Berlin, said to her forgivingly exulting, "Thus we work our miracle! In November you are taking your laundry to the Chinaman's in Harvey Street; in March you wear thirty thousand dollars' worth of emeralds to contrast with that crown of red-gold hair at a ball in the Château de Pontemori," she said:

"The leap is no great one. There is a hair's breadth of difference between the frauds of this world and the pretenses of that. I rather think I am the same Brena."

"But growing!" said he as a horticulturist would speak.

"Yes, growing," said Brena with a sigh.

Other men, sensing subconsciously her ungiven and unused affections, brought all their sophistication to their aid in making love to her. She com-

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bined the classic beauty of the Greek goddess with the illusive shimmering charm of her Irish blood; dozens of men in various capitals noting it, as Peter DeWolfe marked it down later, gave amusement to the Dallas broker and annoyance to her. She said that she might have been thrilled by these idolatries were it not for the fact that they always came either from those whose attentions to women were quite general and successive or from those whose imagination could conceive only a very plain driveway from the thoroughfare of formal society to the sequestered dwelling place of a woman's heart.

"You are rather tired," Parmalee said to her once.

"At first my breath was taken away as if I were an aviator up alone for the first time. But now the flight is rather monotonous. It is as if it were done only for spectators. It has no destination."

He thrust a glance at her and looked up at the ceiling of the railway carriage, reflecting. As usual he understood.

"You rather want to produce something."

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She nodded. "But I do not want to appear ungrateful," she added, speaking as one might speak to an impresario rather than as one speaks to a husband.

"Not at all," said he, hitting out squarely with his pungent frankness. "That's all right. I've been stupid. You are too big to be satisfied with this low-neck nonsense. It is not enough to be the wearer of a gleaming skin in the magnificence of authorized exposure. You want——"

He stopped.

"What do I want?"

"Either love, man, children or else labor, output, self-assertion, a product, a separate personality standing on its two legs alone."

Brena said, "I have an idea that no woman quite knows whether she wants both or can have both or can choose or stick to either. Whatever happens there is always the haunting desire for more of the other thing."

"I know," said he, looking at her with brimming eyes. "It is the tragedy of big women."

Not only because of his words, but equally be-

cause of the self-effacement, the sympathy that he at moments could cast down from some calm eminence which his spirit had learned to climb, Brena always remembered this moment as that which marked the best in him, as that which justified the bargain she had made to salvage that better part.

The contest between that better part and the other—the well-known Compton Parmalee with his ruthless daring instinct for hazards and his almost frantic interest in self-preservation—was a losing fight for Brena. She knew, as he knew, that her power lay in no words, but only in the threads of understanding, conduct and high aims that she could weave with him into his life. Moments had come when she had even believed that if she had won she might have loved him. The things worth saving in him were so rare! She would have thrown herself into a new labor—the reclamation of his youth.

It was not to be. Perhaps he himself knew this as he felt slipping from him the power to resist the habits of mind of years of fierce avarice and the passionate love of his own welfare and his own life. He spoke no word of this realization to Brena.

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After all, the two were far apart, and the girl only sensed, as one who hears a low murmur of a coming tempest, the menace which hung over them.

"There are times when you look at me as if I were the bearer of some evil," she said.

"It is absurd," he told her, but his face had shown the sudden twist of fear.

"You have some knowledge that I have not," she asserted accusingly.

"None," he answered. For a long time he looked at her and then said, "Your father was interested in Aztec architecture?"

"Yes." Her eyes had opened in amazement.

"He went to Mexico more than once," said Parmalee. "He considered that the civilization of the Mayas was far more extraordinary than even experts like Thompson and Nightingale have represented it. He believed that they had developed forces quite unknown to modern life."

"How did you know this?" she asked sharply.

Parmalee was quite nonchalant; he said, "You forget that my library is full of documents and books and monographs which your father asked per-



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mission to consult. I am sorry I did not meet your father."

"You would have found him a man quite incapable of believing in the supernatural whether it be a thing of to-day or attributed to an ancient people."

He thrust a glance at her. "You speak with some heat," he said.

"I suppose so," Brena answered. "It is because I have no patience with unrealities."

"You would say more?" he asked with his uncanny ability to read her thought.

"Yes. I think that you have some purpose in creating this atmosphere of strange and unreal things."

He started to speak, stopped himself and after a long pause exclaimed sharply, "I agree with you."

They rode on toward Cherbourg without speaking, but now and then glancing up as if each weighed the motives and challenged the other.

"You spoke of a piece of paper given to you in a roll of bills," he said at last, with a marked absence

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of his usual assurance. "It fluttered out. You saved it——"

Brena drew back as if the subject were odious. She said with unwonted sharpness, "I have cause to remember. You are always speaking——"

"I've spoken of it only twice," he said. "This time I——"

He appeared frightened.

"I think you said there was a drawing of an arrow and a lizard."

Brena, regretting her moment of temper, said, "I said lizard. I don't see what difference it makes. It wasn't exactly a lizard."

With great promptness he thrust toward her an envelope and a pencil.

"Draw it," he said.

"I told you I had almost forgotten," the girl replied. "I lost the scrap—the figures and the words."

"Draw it," he repeated, "the best you can."

Brena looked out of the car window at the flashes of green and gray of farms and farm buildings as if she were searching in her memory for a photographic impress. Then suddenly with the quick

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precision that gave her hand and mind so many undeveloped talents, she outlined a strange figure on paper.

Parmalee snatched it eagerly and stared; he saw a figure, half snake and half bird.

"That?" said he in a voice which sounded muffled.

"Well, do you know what that is?"

Brena raised the arch of her brows.

"It is the Kuk-ul-can," said Parmalee.

"The Kuk-ul-can," she said repeating it.

"The symbol of the Mayan—the Aztec culture. The supreme object of reverence. The fools who go about the Southwest driving their oil wells, and laying their railroad ties and eating their prepared breakfast foods forget that this symbol is to be found among the present day Zuni and other Pueblo tribes, the degenerate fringes of a civilization which flourished before Rome was suckled by a wolf. They forget that a thousand years ago it was carved on rude adobe walls in memory of a lost grandeur and lost practices, dead these six thousand years."

Brena possessed two laughs, both quite natural and sincere. And now it was her merry Irish laugh.

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"What of all this?" said she. "I will blush for their ignorance, but what more than that can I do on a sunny Thursday? I am not interested, old fellow, in that which is dead. I——"

She stopped suddenly, sobered by a recollection.

"The Kuk-ul-can," said Parmalee. "You've never seen that scrap of paper again, have you?"

This was the last time he ever spoke of it.



## X

WINTER had come again when the Parmalees had settled into a quieter life in New York. Brena had turned the back of her interest upon dining out and the amusement of new acquaintances.

"There is a manner of *savoir faire* to be acquired in it, Compton," she admitted to her husband. "I have acquired it a little, no doubt—a kind of veneer of ease which is like a glass-covered surface of troubled waters. It makes the pool of personality appear calm down to the bottom."

"Yours is," said he. "Yours has shown me the difference between the old deep streams and the new torrents."

"You know how they say that contact makes breadth," Brena went on. "They mean that touching the elbow of a statesman or an artist at dinner provides the glib phrases of foreign relations or allows one to mention casually the newest Spanish

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painter. But it is all surface. For instance there's Mrs. Balmer-Roseboro in London. Her kind is covered with feathers plucked from every magnificent bird that migrates into England. But her mind is really only cotton-wool stuffing. She is only one stage higher than the persons who draw *their* intellectual reputation from reading book reviews, or weeklies printed on uncoated paper which appear authoritative because they are without illustrations. It is being a second-hand dealer—in ideas."

Compton nodded. As if suddenly he had been reminded of a duty, he laughed outright with the artificial laugh which had come with long periods of absent-minded loss of sense of environment during times when, as if in a daze, he stared far away.

"You want to cease seeing people?" he asked.

"I want to learn something—some art or profession, and learn it well. I want to tread upon a solid ground," said Brena.

"Good!" Parmalee said. "I cannot tell you how glad I am to be free from seeing so many people."

There appeared again in his face that weariness from some tensivity which would not relax, an ex-

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pression that increased as the weeks went by and the lives of the two drew more apart.

Less and less did he appear inclined to go out of their apartment; less and less did he go anywhere alone.

"There is a book auction—the Odin Collection with two volumes of illuminated MSS. from the old monastery at El Mayaquez," he said one day in March. "Will you go with me, Brena?"

"Of course," she said, but his request marked sharply the moment of her realization that unless he were behind the closed doors of his library, he always wanted somebody with him. She tried to remember the various occasions when he had found trivial excuses to take the butler or the chauffeur on some short excursion beyond the pretentious entrance of the apartment house; she concluded that he did not ask her to accompany him for the pleasure of companionship. He seldom conversed with her as he had once done; if there was a choice between going with her or in the limousine with Paul, he chose the silent and cynical chauffeur.

Nor was this all. She began to notice frequent

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repetitions of the fear that had seized him within so short a time of their odd marriage. He never spoke of this, but she saw over and over again his face, which had become less youthful now, contort, the color leave it, his eyes grow restless and fill with terror. She had observed him in a theater, even at a moment when a tense dramatic situation was being enacted on the stage, turn around as one turns who feels eyes from behind, and search the faces of those who sat in rows farther back. She had known him to pause at the doorway of a brilliantly lighted café and without paying attention to the beckoning headwaiter, who perhaps was impressed by the distinction and beauty and carriage of Brena, costumed as always with colorings that no other woman of her tints of hair would dare to essay, look searchingly at every party at the tables before giving his hat to the check girl. She had seen him walk from end to end of a limited train gazing from left to right at those in the drawing-room chairs, just as one does to discover an acquaintance, but with his countenance smeared over with grotesque apprehension. He was forever try-



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ing to scrutinize the faces flicking by, whether the afternoon sun shone on them on Fifth Avenue or they peered out in white patches from under the black of jostling umbrellas in a rainy evening on Broadway. Even Brena began to look apprehensively into the world's stream of faces.

He who had once consulted doctors about his precious health; who, when she first had known him, followed the trail of other rich men who amuse themselves with their physical condition but with that passionate love of his own well being and life which was a characteristic developed in him as in no other; who was steamed and rubbed, manipulated, illuminated by various rays and baths of light to add days to his number, now had lost all interest in health. Some external menace had swallowed the fears of those internal. He brooded alone. He consulted no one.

Brena felt it her duty to interrogate him; she was met by the first burst of rage he had ever projected at her.

"Let me alone!" he said evilly, as he thrust a

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vicious glance at her. "I have problems that are my own. Keep your hands off!"

"You forget that whatever it is that is making you so strange affects my life also," said Brena. "Little by little it is isolating us both from normal human beings. You glare into people's faces as if you expected to have the next one fasten his or her teeth in your throat."

"So you are thinking at last of yourself."

"Of course I am," she answered, walking around the living-room table and touching the books there with her finger-tips. "I might say that I was above thinking of myself. But they who say it always excite my suspicion. I'm trying to think of both of us—as an average human being should."

He said, "You forget!" He was in a towering anger.

"No, I don't," Brena replied quietly. "You bought me."

She picked up a novel, read its title and dropped it suddenly, as she said, "Yes, you bought me—the bargain of giving me a life for growth and in return I was to be your companion. You asked for

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no more than that and to have me help you come back to some sweetness of spirit for which you longed. Well, I've given you nothing more than you bought. And nothing less. For I've tried."

He looked up quickly, turned his ear toward her and then, having listened, stared at the ceiling.

"I was wrong," he said. "A brutish moment. I only meant that there is something, of course—my nerves, no doubt—a decay."

"It would be unfair for me not to say more," said Brena.

He folded his small, cold hands upon the open book in his lap and stared.

"You do not mean that some man——"

"No."

"I couldn't tell, of course. A bargain is a bargain. The truth is that I would be joyful if you were made happy. I expect that. But I couldn't know its approach. Your circles and mine are no longer the same. You are ripening still—a wonderful miracle!"

"You have no circle," said Brena.

"No," said he, "I have no circle."

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"There are times when I wonder whether this new turn in our lives is not connected in some way with me."

"New turn?"

"Yes!" She was vehement. "This thing which hangs over us like a guillotine blade. This thing which makes you go about wrapped in your chills of fear. This thing which makes your eyes flicker from side to side as if every street corner were an ambush. The thing which makes you afraid to be alone."

He sprang up.

"What if it were?" he said. "It is possible, isn't it? It is possible that a person might carry around in their trail some strange destiny. There might be some extraordinary forces behind you, mightn't there? It is possible that some tragic end awaits all men who bind their lives with yours."

Brena opened wide her dark eyes.

"That is enough," she said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to leave you, Compton," she said.

If she had spoken these lines in the theatrical em-

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phasis with which they are spoken by several hundred women in each thousand sooner or later, as wise a man as Compton Parmalee would have laughed in her face. It was only necessary to know Brena to know that if she said these words it would be with a calm, a sureness, a regretful sorrow all combined in the tone of her voice and the expression in her eyes that would carry conviction. Compton was convinced.

The idea knocked him onto his knees. He came half crawling, stumbling, struggling up toward her.

"No, no! No, no, Brena—for God's sake!" he whimpered. "For the love of Christ don't leave me!"

At her feet he shampooed his hair as in an imaginary basin until its sparse growth had been rumpled under the palms of his clutching, twitching hands.

"Well, then never speak of any mystery trailing upon my heels," she had said. "Never bring this insinuation that a curse follows me. You have had your chance to be free of it and instead of wanting me to go you want me to stay. I loathe dramatics,

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Compton. This is the twentieth and not the twelfth century and those who now attempt to raise superstitions will fare badly if others believe as I do. Get up!"

He stood. With his eyes indicating humiliation through the terror which still lingered in his face, he arose and walked toward the door.

"Very well," he said at last in cold, hard syllables. "You shall not hear of it again. Forget it. Call it a mad and foolish thing. My lips are sealed. But the time will come. There are stranger things in the world than you know."

He closed the door and left her alone, somewhat shaken; and in spite of all that she had said, somewhat eager to ask him more. If she had, he would have pressed his thin lips tight and said nothing. He did this on later occasions; he had made up his mind to wrestle with his fears, whatever they might be, alone. His physician told Brena confidentially that Compton Parmalee was suffering only from a mild form of neurasthenia in which dread had attached itself to some particular chain of morbid thoughts.

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In March Parmalee conceived the idea that he was being followed. He spoke of it several times and Brena laughed.

"Why should any one follow you?" she inquired scornfully. "You tell me that you understand why I am followed sometimes on my way home from the Studio, but I cannot offer the same explanation for you. Come, Compton, let's be sensible."

He was not amused.

"Then report it to the police," she said.

"The police!"

"Yes."

"What a suggestion!"

She heard no more, however, of his morbid suspicion; no one was following him she was convinced. And yet the unknown terror, of which he would now say nothing, infected her so that the cloth of each day had woven into it some threads of fear, in a crazy, senseless, indistinct pattern.

A crisis came on one of those warm evenings which descend suddenly upon the chill of the winter and tell of an impatient, hasty, headlong Spring, which has crept up through the open country and

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comes at dusk to the gates of the cities. Some musical performance, long since forgotten by Brena, took the pair out until nearly eleven, and Parmalee wanted to walk home through the moonlight. A sleepy elevator man took them up in a chaste, white and gold car to their apartment door.

"Good night," said Brena. "Good night, Compton. You seemed to-night more like yourself."

He laughed and waved to her as she went down the corridor to her chambers. She switched on the wall lights of her dressing-room, bedroom and bath, and undressed leisurely before the long mirror, looking about as her memory took her back to the hot room under the roof at Mrs. Wilkie's with its yellow varnished wood-work and its plaster walls, stained a hideous thermic orange, its little red ants that no eradicator ever eradicated and the screams of the baby coming out of a window in the next house. Nothing in the luxurious quarters she now occupied could remind one of Mrs. Wilkie's unless it were the picture of the Acropolis that had belonged to Brena's father, still in its battered frame and hanging above her bed. And yet she stopped



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braiding her red-bronze hair as one of those strange calls of wistful longing for the past, even for the tragic or the sordid past, that comes to all of us, came to her.

No one would credit her with remembering some few years afterward the exact contents of her thoughts at this moment, were it not a fact that the thought itself had been interrupted and therefore engraved by three quick successive pistol shots.

They came and went as revolver cracks do behind heavy closed doors with a muffled thudding; she knew what they were. They were followed by a little crash as of a vase falling.

Her first thought was that Parmalee had killed himself. Perhaps if her mind had been less active she would have screamed, flung open the door and rushed out, expecting the horrors of a suicide; she remembered, however, that there had been three shots, more than the number usually fired by one who seeks destruction. Brena concluded that whatever the menace her husband had feared, it now had proved its reality. She has said since that, for the moment, she at least believed, and even in her

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startled breathing she formed the words, "It is some fault of mine."

The turning out of her own lights disclosed the fact that the corridor beyond the crack under her own door was dark also. From it came no sound, except for the distant purr of the elevator taking up some yawning after-theater homecomers. Brena could only hear her own heart.

Without the dangerous background of light behind her, she opened the door cautiously and the moon's rays on the carpet beneath her feet went forward across the carpet in the corridor like sliding fingers.

"Stand back, Brena. Don't get between me and him. He's at the end of the hall." It was the voice of her husband. "Look out. I'm going to turn on the lights!"

A sudden rush of illumination filled the corridor.

"You are a fool!" said Brena.

"I?"

"You have shot the glass out of this picture." She pointed to the large photographic print of "The Man with the Glove" that had been the one wedding

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present sent after them from Dallas by a Jewish cotton broker, once one of Parmalee's bitter rivals. It had been the subject of Brena's comment that the donor gave it in celebration of Parmalee's retirement from business rather than of his marriage, and she, disliking pictures on general principles, had hung it where it would be seen the least.

"I thought it was him," said Parmalee, coming forward with the revolver still in his hand.

"Him?" asked Brena. "Who then?"

"Why, a burglar," he said, still quivering with excitement.

"You saw only your own moving reflection on the glass mixed into this figure which you've decorated with three bullet holes," she said.

A knocking and ringing had begun at the elevator door of the apartment.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked a voice outside.

"No, no," Parmalee answered, feeling his way back till he could lean against the wall.

"Very good, sir."

Brena, who probably appeared more like a Grecian goddess than ever in the white drapery of her night

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attire, walked to Parmalee with deliberation and took the revolver from his hand.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"I bought it."

"When?"

"A month ago."

"A month ago? Why?"

"I don't know. There are always intruders."

"Compton, you are a sick man," she said. "You are a sick and unnerved man. You are living a miserable life. You are making me live one. There is nothing worse than fear. It is more horrible than the thing it dreads."

"I've often thought that—yes, I have!" he said.

"I've often thought I'd be driven to find out."

"Tell me," she commanded.

He shut tight his thin lips.

She came closer and put her hands upon his shoulders as if she were a mother about to give a child a good shaking.

"The city is bad for you, Compton," she said.

"You are quivering yourself to pieces over some

absurd apprehension. We must go outside somewhere—a house, a garden—quiet.”

He appeared as if he were about to fall apart. He almost blubbered. He said, “Thank God you’ve said that, Brena. We must go where I can escape, if there is a chance to escape. You’re right. It’s got my nerve.”

“What?”

“Yes, what?” he whimpered. “That’s it. But we must go—where you said. I’ll pull myself together. And Brena——”

“Yes.”

“If anything does happen to me——”

“Yes.”

“——you’re not to blame—not in the sense that it’s your own will. Do you understand? I’m trying to be a man. Can’t you see. In the morning——”

She looked at him in disgust; for the first time she felt a pang of hate.

Within thirty days he had purchased a great gloomy house up the Hudson. It had been built in the seventies by some affluent banker with a taste for squares. The house was square, the rooms in it

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were spacious, lofty, hollow-sounding cubes, and the garden was square in a square area which contained itself and the house within a high brick wall painted a slate gray to match the house and with a great decorated iron gate which could be closed at night. The upper windows looked out in summer upon the tossing branches of old trees growing out of vast, damp bald spots on the lawn and in winter upon the stark boughs and the silver of the Hudson River. The place was in a slight hollow in a hill top, isolated, glowering, without the flavor of old places lived in richly and warmly, but suggesting questionings as to which room the family had used to die in, and forecasting nights when the wind would howl around the corners of the French roof.

Parmalee had a coping of concrete, filled with broken glass, built all around the top of the wall. He had ordered iron bars for the lower windows, and a bill for an elaborate electric burglar-alarm system was on his desk the morning that he disclosed to Brena that he had bought her a house.

"At last you have a home," said he.



## XI

THE retreat into the walled estate which perched like a great cube of gray gloom among the twisted old trees overlooking the Hudson River gave little relief to the secret fears of Compton Parmalee.

For a few months, to be sure, he showed lively interest in the rehabilitation of the place. Brena, who after a long struggle with her conscience had made up her mind to stand by her extraordinary husband, found herself wondering often enough whether his interest was not like her own, a sham erected out of a sense of duty by one to deceive the other. During this first period of their terrible existence there, she built up a slender tottering hope that she might, as she had agreed, reclaim him. She had formulated a policy and to this policy she would cling with all the tenacity of which she was capable.

Her policy had been formed with full knowledge of the fact that it would be hard to follow. Her own nature revolted against mysteries and supersti-

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tions and fears of unrealities. Her husband had not ever given her grounds to assert that these were the basis for his morbid panics, but he had, by malice or inadvertence, created a dim picture of some menace, some secret human conspiracy, some strange force, which pursued to the death any man unlucky enough to have meddled with her destiny. At times it was difficult for her to escape, by the exercise of common sense, a haunting idea that there was some foundation for this apparent absurdity. As she said: "It is just so with all things. The confidence of knowledge isn't half as much because a person has possession of the facts as because one has freedom at last from the fear that there is so much that one doesn't know." But she disliked herself for her own uncertainties.

A choice was open to her between turning her back upon Parmalee's fears and setting out by systematic and persistent observation and cross questioning to uncover them. It was not because the latter course was difficult that she rejected it; it was not because, little by little, he had built a wall around his own thoughts which not only unfitted



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him for social contact but excluded her from his inner life; it was not because of his increasing irritability when questioned, nor finally was it because he always, in the end, made her feel that he was trying to spare her from some dreadful knowledge, and some overhanging curse that was upon her. She chose to neglect the terror that had seized him because she felt that if sufficient neglect were heaped upon it, it would gradually die. Often enough in years that were to follow she wished with all her being that she had not allowed herself to remain in the dark.

She wished often enough after the end came that she had at least kept her eyes open, but there were incidents which drew her attention by the very force of their being extraordinary or bizarre.

Evenings spent in the high studded chambers of this austere abode that none of her decorative skill, given free play by Parmalee's money, could rescue from their brooding gloom were far from cheerful. The temper of her husband forbade entertainment and, try as he did, there was no comfort for him in his efforts to converse with Brena—efforts which

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like the squeezing of the juice from a sour fruit produced less the more the pressure had been applied. Within a year he had developed an insatiable appetite for his studies of the history of the Southwest, his collecting of books and manuscripts bearing upon the ancient civilization and tribes of Central America, Mexico and the tangent region of the United States where the painted deserts are, and his compilation of data that bore in any way upon the comparison of the Inca, the Aztec and the Yucatan civilizations with those of Egypt, Greece and Persia. There is still in existence, covered with dust, a pile of manuscript in his own handwriting which, it appears, was the beginning of a work upon a subject that only his interest qualified him to attempt. A speculator, gambler, cotton broker and commission agent, as Brena has said, does not bring to a pretentious scientific work, the orderly mind, the ease of expression nor the realization of its magnitude that one might expect in a professor, for instance. He might better have spent his time in furnishing to his beautiful young wife a companionship of some kind no matter how inadequate, but he had closed

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himself in a ghastly shell of his own. Sometimes for days she did not see him at all and only knew of his presence in his library by his fits of coughing.

Brena, committed to waiting for the conclusive end to this distorted existence, which something within told her destiny would bring, found refreshment only in her days. When morning came there was an escape; she could go by train or motor to the city. Though she found among the persons she met and those who worked with her in the Forest Pottery, founded with her own money, that she (a grim joke) was looked upon distantly as a young, rich, contented wife, she drank down long draughts of the pleasures of creative labor and of the patronage she was able to give to young women whose talents deserved development. Her activity would have been sufficient, however, if it had served only to submerge the memories of nights alone in her two great rooms when the wind played mournful melodies as if on the bars of moonlight that fell through the gates of Parmalee's estate and across the damp lawn from which, winter and summer, there arose the odors of decay and death.

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If the idea that she was wasting her rare youth, her marked beauty and the full capacities of her womanhood sometimes oppressed her, she at least kept her peace. Something of firmness, not there before, began to appear upon her face. Probably no mirror could have shown her as clearly the woman she was throwing away as the portrait of her painted during this period by young Sydenham, who had just come over from England.

He succeeded, it was said, in expressing in his colors and bold method that extraordinary combination in Brena which gave her the atmosphere of the permanence of a temple and yet the shimmer of a golden moment, come and gone in a warm transitory glow beneath her cream-colored skin, a glimmer of light from her golden-red hair, or some almost imperceptible flexure of her sensitive lips.

Parmalee, urged by his wife, saw this portrait when young Sydenham had finished it. He thrust his glances at it in his usual way and several times turned one ear toward the picture as if inviting words from it.

"A person!" he said. "And most of her is there

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—a good deal of her soul. A glorious piece of color—a massive glow and yet her eyes—they are the masters of the canvas. That is astonishing——”

Of course Sydenham beamed. He fed upon admiration—as much perhaps upon that which came to him because he was one of those men who may be called a beautiful youth and had been petted by the idle rich and their daughters, as upon the praises for his extraordinary art.

“Well, I shall buy it,” Parmalee had said with a sudden unannounced determination for which Brena was unprepared. She showed it by the astonishment in her eyes.

Sydenham smiled. He said: “But, Mr. Parmalee, it was the understanding with Mrs. Parmalee that I was to exhibit the picture. All things considered it is the best thing I have ever done. I have planned to exhibit my things rather widely in America. Shall I say that I am going en tour across the country? After exhibiting—why then—of course——”

Parmalee’s face contorted. He wet his lips.

“You have a price,” he snapped out.

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Sydenham, the self-confident, the whimsical, the theatrical youth waved his pale hand.

"At present there is no price, Mr. Parmalee," he said.

The cotton broker pulled at his collar rim as if he had need of air.

"What have you proposed as the title of this picture?"

"Why—the—name—Mrs. Parmalee——"

"That's foolish, Sydenham," Compton said. "I'm prejudiced in favor of the name Parmalee, but even I know better than to exhibit a picture under the title Mrs. Smith Jones or even Mrs. Parmalee."

"Oh, I know," Sydenham replied with his superior manner. "I didn't mean that; I'd thought it better to call the picture Brena."

"Brena!" roared Parmalee.

"Yes."

"I won't have it!"

"Why not?" his wife asked rising from the divan and coming out of the studio shadows. "Why not, Compton?"

"Because the name is a peculiar name," said her

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husband in a ridiculous petty rage. "It is yours and I don't want it spread all over every picture gallery. It's bad enough——"

"Wait," Sydenham interrupted. "You have no cause to be disturbed. I shall call the picture 'The Riddle.' It will be offered to you at the end of my exhibitions under that title."

It never was offered to Parmalee as a matter of fact and those who remember it only identify it by the title Sydenham gave it, but Brena tried in vain whenever she thought of this incident during that period to escape the conclusion that Compton feared that somewhere some one would recognize her likeness, especially if her own name had been attached to it, and then through the artist trace back until she were found.

Not six months later the suggestion that Parmalee feared some individual or group of individuals who would deliver to him a dreadful vengeance, came sharply to her attention, leaping up, like a horrid shape out of the quiet path of life, to stare into her face.

She had been motoring out from New York with

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Paul, the tactiturn chauffeur, who always appeared to her to be a man with the odors of the penitentiary clinging to his bristled, badly shaped head, but who had been retained by Parmalee, through many a raise in salary and many an exhibition of insolence.

"I'm glad that you are well again," Brena said to him as they were winding up the vine-like road that approached the glowering old house.

"I'm not well, madame," Paul said. "But the substitute—Marks—the man Mr. Parmalee engaged to cover my illness, ma'am—he left."

"I didn't know," she said. "Mr. Parmalee engages all the employees, Paul—even the maids. He wishes to do so. So I didn't know."

"There's much that one doesn't know, ma'am, isn't there?" he said in an oily voice behind which was a snarl.

"What do you mean?"

"For instance, the reason Marks left."

"What reason?"

"Well, ma'am, Mr. Parmalee is suspicious of servants. You probably don't know he requires a birth certificate and all of that. Getting a job here is just



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like getting a passport, ma'am. And Marks he had one forged—he did—not meaning any harm. But Mr. Parmalee found it out. He wrote himself to the city clerk of the place. And when he knew, there was no taming him, ma'am. He was like a rat in a corner, if I may say so—frothing like a mad dog."

If Paul had not occupied a position from which no insolence of his own ever had dislodged him, Brena would have dismissed him then and there. She knew, however, that her husband would reinstate him.

"Paul is a handy man—with his fists and perhaps with other weapons," Parmalee had said. "I feel that he would be useful in an emergency."

Brena concluded that not only was Compton living in terror himself, but that now and then he yielded to the temptation to communicate this terror to her just as one who suffers from a disease might have a degenerate desire to spread its contagion. She resisted this by pretending not to recognize the existence of any abnormality in their lives.

The third winter of their marriage her husband began a practice of finding relief from that terror

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which had crept in upon him at first but now had begun to drive his nerves into a gallop. He who had conserved so carefully his precious health, now undertook a new burden.

Brena came down one morning when the rain of a wild March day was beating on the windows. The wind, tearing up the leaves of the Autumn that had lain all winter beneath the snow and ice of the mournful, dripping garden but was now released by a thaw, was slapping wet refuse against the great window panes behind the menacing iron bars. It cast rotten vegetation at this house as if it were throwing riff-raff into the face of an accursed personality.

Parmalee did not answer her call. He was not at the breakfast table. The servants could not find him in his rooms. He was discovered finally by his voice which came in faintly with the sound of the wind. Brena without protection from the driving rain ran out the great front door, down the path which cut a diameter in the circle of the driveway, to the massive iron gate.

Parmalee was there with his little white hands

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grasping the upright bars—swaying backward and forward like a caged animal, staring out with wild red eyes at the high shores of the distant river bank seen through the haze, his bare head wet and disheveled.

“Come on and get me—damn your eyes!” he screamed. “You’ve been waiting long enough. Come on and get me. I’m not afraid of you all.”

Brena looked over his shoulder up and down the road beyond the gate. Water was standing in the shallow ruts and the shrubbery whipped by the wind danced like lithe devils along the crest of the palisade. But no living creature was in sight.

“You better come into the house, Compton,” she said with a tone of authority.

She realized afterward that she had leaped rather joyfully toward the conclusion that this moment explained the menace which had hung over them so long and that it promised a definite end of her obligations. She remembered of thinking how like an angry impotent little dog he was, coward at heart, but barking behind a gate at an empty road. She believed he had lost his mind.

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"Come into the house," she repeated.

He looked at her stupidly, his lower jaw limp and hanging, his eyes watery and looking into her face with the troubled expression of one trying to discover the surroundings after a loss of consciousness.

"All right," he said hoarsely, "I'm all right, Brena."

He appeared weak, unable to carry himself erect, and his breath wheezed unpleasantly as he followed her meekly up the walk and the wet granite steps of the frowning house.

"Go upstairs and lie down," she commanded.

He stopped with his hands on the black walnut newel post of the stairs and leaned toward her confidentially.

"Footprints," said he grinning like a fiend. "Footprints."

Brena, opening the door of his library, walked rapidly toward the telephone on his desk. At last she had been driven to summon the aid, counsel and authority of the world beyond the doors of this damned home. Parmalee was mad. But as she put

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out her hand toward the telephone instrument it knocked over an empty glass. She raised this glass to her nose. The supports of her heart suddenly crumbled, for she knew then that her husband was not mad, not changed permanently from the crafty, secretive, self-isolated and haunted man that he had been, but was only at the end of a long night of trying to drink himself into the freedom of insensibility.

At this moment she wondered why she did not feel a marked increase of the old loathing and disgust that she had been unable to weed out as it had sprung up like some rank growth. At this moment she remembered his first appeal to her, how he had begged her to help him win back the clean spirit of his boyhood, how she had once seen the glint of that treasured something, which men forget to keep, shining dimly in the midst of decay, how having tasted the bitterness of success, he had built new hope. Now he was a grotesque failure, pounding to pieces upon some unseen rock below the surface of the waters. He was paying the account of lifetime perhaps; perhaps the reckoning of

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one mistake. There surged up to the brim in her heart a great pity.

To Brena the cause of his panic, his terror, his suspicions, his isolation, the horrid exiled days he led, the sleepless nights he spent now appeared of less importance than the fact that no man was suffering more than he. But she was unable to help him: his defenses were now impregnable.

"I do not know what you mean," he said. "We live a clean, wholesome kind of existence, don't we? You never hear complaints from me. I do not go out much, it is true. But I am working. I do not sleep well. Neither do many men. I drank too much once, that is true. But that was thirty or forty days ago. You have not seen me make the mistake again."

"You are forever sending John down for a new bottle," said Brena.

He thrust a glance at her.

"It calms me. My nerves are not good—there's no denying. But why should you complain, Brena? You have your freedom. You go your own ways. You conduct your own studies. You can have any-

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thing you want for the asking. Why complain?"

"I'm not complaining," she had said shutting her lips into a firm line. "I am inquiring."

"Inquiring?" he said with sudden heat. "Well, by God, if you ask once too often—you shall know! I'll tell you something about yourself you'll not want to hear."

"You cannot," she answered quietly.

"Are you laughing at me?" he exclaimed angrily.

"I was smiling."

"Smile on!" he snapped. "Maybe you can tell where Jim Hennepin is. Maybe in the end you won't smile. Maybe you will learn what it is that has clung to you unseen and unknown."

"I demand to know."

"No—by God—you shan't. Not until I know all—myself. Not until I know how I shall pay."

He paused.

"And let that come quickly," he added throwing his open hands toward the ceiling as if beseeching heathen gods. "Sudden, swift and sure!"

He rushed out of the room.

Night after night she heard him pacing his study

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floor beneath her room. He walked twenty paces one way, twenty at right angles, twenty more, twenty more. She had learned the count. He was pacing off a square around his big, paper-laden desk in the center of the room. She went to sleep with that sound of a caged animal in her ears; she awoke in the middle of the night when the moon of summer threw the shadows of the plumed branches of the great trees upon her floor, hearing that faithful beat of footsteps she could recall, awaking when the bright sunlight was prying at the shutters on the western windows to hear the measure of his pacing.

Once she had awakened in the night and heard no sound. She had crept down the stairs and peered into his study. He was crouching down below the window sill, only his eyes above, like a man in ambush, or like one who expects an attack upon his home, watching the running shadows made by trees, shrubs, wind and moon upon the lawn.

"What are you doing, Compton?" she asked.

He had jumped around and then laughed.

"What are you doing down here? You'll catch cold. I was thinking."



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"Thinking? Thinking of what?"

"Of life."

"And what about it?"

"How I love it!" he had exclaimed.

A few days later he rode in with Brena to New York. A new spirit had come into him. His eyes were filled with a new light; his voice had grown more firm. He did not converse with his young wife, but his silence had changed from that of fear and brooding to that of one who plans and weighs. On his countenance was a new expression, in his motions something of the former dynamic activity and decisiveness.

When Brena came home that evening she asked if he was there.

"No, ma'am," said the maid. "There's been some one telephoning from New York. His lawyers, ma'am."

"Oh, Mr. Lanfrew."

"Yes, ma'am. Several times, ma'am."

Brena ate dinner alone.

At half-past eight the telephone rang again.

"I will answer it," said Brena.

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Again it was Mr. Lanfrew. He wanted to speak to Mr. Parmalee. It was about some legal document that had been drawn that morning.

"But Mr. Parmalee is not here yet," said Brena.

"That's strange," said the telephone instrument. "That's strange. I understood he was going home. I understood you were going on a long journey, Mrs. Parmalee. He had drawn the money to buy tickets. I thought he said that he was going to surprise you. He wanted to hurry home this afternoon."

"I'm sorry but he hasn't come."

"Or sent you any word?" the telephone asked.

"No word," said Brena.

She shuddered. She wondered if by any chance it could be that the blow had fallen at last—the final dread conviction; she felt that it had.

Brena was right. Compton Parmalee, in spite of the secret efforts of the police, in spite of all that money could do to conduct a search without publicity, had dissolved as completely as a wisp of smoke in the blast of some great wind of heaven.

## XII

PETER DEWOLFE drew in a long breath, put the palms of his hands upon the tightest area of his waistcoat over his expanded chest, threw back his head and exhaled so that it sounded a good deal like a sigh.

"Well," said he. "That is not a very pretty story."

The lamp had gone out; the slate gray light of early summer dawn filtered through the chintz curtains of the apartment of Brena Selcoss. She was facing this watery light, her beautiful hands folded in her lap, her dark eyes looking into profound space. In her attitude and in her expression Peter saw the suggestion of one condemned, who has awakened upon the day of execution and sits upon the side of a prison cot, thinking.

"No, Peter," Brena said at last. "It is not a pretty story."

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"I'm sorry," he said, drawing his chair nearer to hers, and leaning forward he took her hands in his. They were cold as marble. She shivered as one who, having no sleep, feels the dawn as a wet shroud. After a slow inquiring glance around the little chamber where in a variety of soft colors, in seasoned, suggestive furniture and in the smaller things, something of the rich diversity of herself had been expressed, she at last looked at Peter.

"I know," said he. "I am a shaggy brute. The room is cold—a kind of a still, stagnant cold. I'll light the fire."

She did not protest: for the moment her own will appeared inert. She watched him dully as he put the lumps of soft coal into the typical London grate and poked them meditatively just as if he had been born an Englishman and found that a soft-coal fire was an entertainment as well as a utility. She allowed him to lead her to the little upholstered sofa which he had pulled in front of the yellow flames and to put her wrap, laid aside when they had come in, around her shoulders and to put his hand upon

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her throat and cheek as he stood behind her still thinking.

"That is an ugly story," he said as if determined that there might be no question as to the premise upon which his comments would be based.

Brena nodded. She said: "You can see now, Peter, why the one moment when your arms were about me and your lips were on mine is the end. If I knew I was free, Peter, I could not see more of you. I could not bear the thought that you too——"

"Would be rubbed out?" he finished and laughed. She did not answer.

"But you can't believe——" he began. "Damn it—the thing is too absurd, too picturesque."

He considered it a moment.

"Why, if there were anything in it, Brena, dear one, it would be magnificent!"

"You forget that I have lived close to this thing. You might believe too, if you had heard not my words but the words of life itself."

"You've told me all?"

Brena, sensing the presence of a doubt, rose and,

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leaning upon the mantel with her face bent down toward the firelight, waited for several moments before she said, wearily, "Yes, Peter—all."

"And others know?"

"Only Muriel Benham," she answered. "It was when I was ill. I had fled from America. It was ghastly there and I had the—what can I say?—the instinct for flight. I went to France. There was pneumonia and after that I found my little retreat in Beconshire. Muriel was kind. She attended to my mail. I did not expect a letter from Lanfrew—his lawyer. She read it. There was a reference to—to both—to both."

"I understand," said Peter. "You explained a little; you had to."

He walked up and down the rug, touching the repetitions of the pattern with the toes of his shoes.

"How long has it been since he—went?" he asked.

"Over three years."

"And no word?"

"No word. Like the other—nothing—complete—nothing."

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Peter made a wry face as if the phrases had made real to him the fact.

"There was no publicity?"

"No—almost none—a paragraph or two. Less perhaps than there would have been in London or Paris. In New York we were unattached—just people with a little money—making no acquaintances—nobody."

Peter nodded, reflecting that after all there could be nowhere on earth quite the obscurity of a man with a million or two living on his income in New York.

"What became of his money?" he asked.

"It is there——"

"Untouched?"

"Untouched."

He scowled. He said: "The house?"

"Just as I left it—one October day. Just as it was. Nothing changed, I suppose—insured, and left there. A haunted place, Peter—a place where one expects to find a poor murdered creature lying face upward just beyond every door sill. I fled. I even

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left the dog. I sent back a telegram to a neighbor—the caretaker—and gave him the beast.”

“You didn’t speak of a dog.”

“I forgot—a horror of a beast, turned loose inside the walls at night when the gate was closed. It was his dog, bought a few months before—a cross between a Great Dane and bloodhound—a thing with white fangs. They had to shoot him, I’ve heard.”

Peter, walking to the table, picked up a small bronze Buddha upon whose face there was a satanic grin and with great seriousness the man gazed back at the heathen thing for several minutes.

“What about this—whoever it was—this symbol, half bird and half snake—Kuk-ul-can? You never found it again?”

“Yes,” said Brena.

“You found it?” He appeared unable to believe.

“Yes,” she said. “I had kept the purse. It belonged to my mother. I kept it. In the lining—last year—I found the scrap of paper.”

“It’s here?” asked Peter with a marked eagerness.

“Yes.” She got up again, brushed the stray red-



gold hair from her high calm forehead and opened a box on the bookshelves. When she gave the torn bit to Peter, she did not follow it with her glance; her gesture gave the impression that she regarded the scrap of paper as of little consequence.

Peter, however, was interested. He threw his cigarette into the fire and walking to the window examined the crude drawing, looked at the two words scrawled beneath and pushing aside the curtains held the scrap up to the gray light.

He was interrupted by Brena's voice. It was filled with the tone of agony, of weariness, of sickness of soul.

"Peter, be merciful."

He wheeled about. She had been sitting gazing at him.

"Can't you see, Peter, that you must say good-by to me? Can't you see that it is torture not to say good-by? Can't you see, Peter, that I want you to go, that I want to go myself—back to Beconshire, to Beconshire, to my garden, my books, the wide view over the sweep of open country? Can't you see that I want the memory of these days to end with your

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kiss—that now we are only obliterating that memory?”

He came back toward her and poking the fire again he laughed to himself.

“You don’t think there is to be an ending—now?” he asked after a moment.

She looked at him with her eyes filled with wonderment.

“Oh, no,” said he. “No ending, dear one. Here’s where we begin. There’s just some cold hard business to do now. If it weren’t for that I’d be sitting there beside you holding you very tight until we were found by the authorities starved to death.”

“Peter!”

“Yes. I mean it. That wasn’t a pretty story. But it hasn’t jarred me, Brena. We’ve definite work cut out for us. First we’ve the job of getting your freedom—or finding out and proving that some death-dealing agency has given it to you already. Then we’ll uncover this trail of fear that tracks you, dear. It’s the work first.”

“You dare——”

“Dare?” said Peter. “Don’t make fun of me. Do

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you suppose I'd quit now? I want to go and get the facts, Brena. I want to knock to pieces this hideous waiting you've done—this menace. I want to come and get you then, Brena—if you love me."

"Love you, Peter?" She buried her face in her hands.

He stood before her, looking down, and his hands would have taken her head between them if he had permitted them to exercise a will that directed them as if flesh and bone and sinew had volition of their own.

"I love you, Peter?" she said without looking up. "Why, I love you as I never knew love could be."

"Then you help me to be strong," he commanded. "We've got to be Spartans now. You're going back to Beconshire to-day—I'm going to America on the first boat that I can get—passage or stowaway."

She looked up amazed.

"I want this scrap of paper," he said. "I want the keys, if you've got 'em, to that house up the Hudson. I want a letter to Lanfrew, the lawyer. I want your permission to do anything I want—burn the house down, perhaps. I may cable you

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for more facts if I want them. I'm going out now to cable some persons on my own list, Brena."

"It is useless," she said wearily. "You forget I've had nearly four years of it—leading nowhere, explaining nothing, dear. It will only cause me new humiliation—perhaps drag my name——"

"No, it won't," he said, "I'm going to do the job myself."

"Please——" she began.

Peter smiled grimly as he held up his hand.

"Well, I'm no detective, Brena, I'll admit. I am glad to be able to tell you that I am not a Master Mind, or a great Analyst or any other kind of a red or yellow bound sleuth. I didn't even look for wireless apparatus in Central Park before I joined the Army. Spies and mysteries bore me to death."

He chuckled, however, as if glad that he was alive.

"I'm more or less an idler whose time is almost all taken up in one way or another. I'm a New York bachelor on the loose who has written a little verse and killed a few Germans, for which I have suffered a definite nausea afterward, as I would not confess

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to anyone else. I'm no unraveler of tangled skeins. But——"

She took his hand and pressed its back against her cheek.

"But——!" Peter repeated. "But—I'm going to let some sunshine in upon this thing if I break my neck—there's only one thing that's hard——"

She asked him to tell her.

"To leave you," he said. "It's going to tear the roots like pulling up grass."

Brena, arising, threw the wrap aside and paced back and forth, as he had paced, with her hands examining each other as if they were strangers met for the first time. When she stopped her great dark eyes were wet and filled with the old look of fear.

"You shall not throw yourself away, Peter," she said with a breaking voice.

"Nonsense."

"But you don't know, Peter!"

"All that you know."

"If it happened to you——"

"Yes?" asked Peter with his lips closing tightly over the question.

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"It would no longer be fear alone, Peter; it would be grief too great to bear!"

He was silent: perhaps shaken for the moment.

She ran to him, seizing his coat, his wrists, his neck, one after the other, as if no strength was hers to hold him back.

"Don't," said he.

She was still.

"I shall do as I said, Brena. No harm will come to me. None ever does. I shall do it alone if need be. Or we can do it together. How's your courage?"

She looked long and searchingly into his steady blue eyes.

"What do you want me to do, Peter?"

"I want you to write those letters for me. That's all I need now. I want you to go back to Beconshire and wait till you hear."

"Hear from you?" she said in shaking voice.

"Yes—you'll hear from me," he said. "Why, my Lord, Brena, there's no danger to me. That's grotesque absurdity. I rather wish there were dan-

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ger. It's a tonic! Anyhow I'll give you my own lawyer's address."

She glanced once more into his smile and then, with something of the manner of a proud mother, she looked fondly from head to foot of him, at his lean, sinewy figure, at the clearness of his eyes, the curve at his temples, the outdoor cleanliness of his skin. There was a suggestion of possession in this quick inspection of hers, a suggestion that he was hers as much as if she had created him. But as if, now, she belonged to him, she did his bidding.

When she had finished writing at the little antique desk, she threw the red feather of the quill pen onto the table.

Peter had been thinking.

"Once more," he said.

He took her into his arms, holding her head close to his shoulder; he turned her chin up with the palm of his hand and pressed again his lips upon hers. He could hear the watch in his own pocket ticking away the seconds. He could hear her heart beating a slower rhythm.

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"A long draught," he said at last. "I could not go so thirsty—away."

"You mustn't go."

"Brena, dear one," he said. "There is only one thing to do now and that must be done. Let's set our faces like flint. I think after all——"

She knew as if by magic that which he was going to say.

"That there is more love in going than in staying—for both of us."

"Yes," said Peter touching her forehead again. "Good-by."

He closed the door quietly.

"Peter!" she called from behind it.

He continued down the carpeted stairs and out into the first morning sunlight that came tumbling down over the chimney pots into the narrow street.

"Vanished?" he said aloud. "What piffle! And yet——"

He looked about him: the street was empty except for one small child who was sweeping the sidewalk with a broom three times the youngster's own height.



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"Good morning," said Peter.

"S'fine mornin'," the one in kilts said.

"Finest ever, son," returned Peter.

"I ain't a boy; I'm a girl, sir."

"Well, it's a fine morning in any case."

Peter walked on, thinking; he had a lot of thinking to do.

It added somewhat to his need of thinking when he found at the steamship dock in Liverpool a plain envelope addressed to him in which was a scrap of torn paper. Upon it in typewritten letters and unsigned were the words:

"Be warned before it is too late."

Peter raised the scrap of paper to his nose; it was pungent with an odor of some strong chemical.

He stood thinking for a moment, blinking at the reds and grays and browns of the shipping in Liverpool Harbor and the distant sky veiled with smut and smoke of city and barred by smokestacks and masts.

"Damn them—whoever they are," he said. "This time they've got a fight on their hands."

### XIII

PETER had spent eight days upon the sea and had landed on his own soil again before he came to the full realization that mere reasoning will not solve baffling problems such as that upon the untangling of which he now had so much at stake.

He had come into New York without word to his acquaintances; only Colby Pennington of Pennington, Gould and Goodhue, who was the son of the elder DeWolfe's attorney, knew of Peter's return from his long absence. This lean, unemotional lawyer looked upon his young client, put in hand by the death of the elder Pennington, as he would upon an odd heirloom without much intrinsic value. The law business did not pay much in spite of the size of the DeWolfe estate and the younger DeWolfe was considered by those who are conventional, regular and of stock patterns, as a rather uncertain mixture of quantity and quality.

Pennington had never expected Peter to explode

or disgrace himself, but the lawyer belonged to a type of correct and regular life which does not fear departures from correctness and regularity and stock patterns of human beings as much because of known hazards as because of the unknown hazards which those who always play safe imagine lie in ambush behind independence and originality and imagination. For instance it would have disturbed the chilly Colby to have known that Peter was returning from a record of hard action, wounds and decoration, without a word to his friends, and that instead of going to his club, he went, like a returning ghost, to his old apartment where the heat of the summer had been locked in and where for many months the severe portrait of the elder DeWolfe had directed an unblinking frowning gaze at the door waiting for the son's return. Such a return was not cut according to approved fashion and if Pennington had known of its nature he would have felt a vague anxiety.

Peter knowing this merely asked, after a greeting, whether any cables had come for him; finding that there were none he went for a lonely dinner and

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a night alone in his apartment with his trunks standing around among the linen-covered chairs like fat, solid men whom Peter had called in for conference.

The fact was that Peter had determined to hold a conference with himself. He had opened the musty apartment which had been his bachelor retreat for several years; there had entered only the unstirring, hushed air which, as if itself exhausted by the day's heat, hung in a night haze over the city below his high windows and dimmed the blinking, winking lights across the Park. The muffled sound of a hurdy-gurdy that had invaded this district of pretense and high rents, like a shabby minstrel of the poor ground out its worn-out war tunes to forbidding, boarded-up residences in a forlorn hope of largess. The night was not one for clear thinking, but Peter, having tied the waist string of his pajamas, sat down in an old leather chair before the empty fireplace, and wiping his forehead stared into the chimney back.

During the voyage he had failed to think to a result of any kind, and the reasons were two. He defined them now readily enough: they were the in-

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fluence of the sea and the memory of Brena. There had been the spell of the sea—the sea that Peter loved so well, the personality of the sea that could be a basin of iridescent oil in a tropic calm, an enigma of chill gray mist-enveloped soul, a fury of glorious racing rage, a beam of strange quiet messages from whining, crooning lands at the other ends of the earth, a voice from far and unseen peoples, a yielder of mysteries belched forth from its amethyst and beryl depths, a thing able to cover, with a superb superiority to the trivialities of life and death, the last trace of all that it takes into the confidence of its eternal peace. The sea had invited Peter to more musing upon his problem but it had erased days with its sweep of sunlight and its salt spray and with its miracle of obliterating hours in the flow of a great eternity.

The memory of Brena, whose personality had seemed as everlasting as that of the sea itself, had done its part. She had appeared, but with irritating indistinctness, before his eyes and seeking to feel by reaction the touch of her lips, to see again with all the definition of reality, her dark eyes and her red-

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gold hair, to hear her voice, to sense the warmth of her lithe, flexible body, to recall the miracle by which for the first time in his life spiritual love, the love of companionship and the love of woman had been all woven into one fabric, he had realized more than when he had been with her, the stability of an affection that had come upon him with a fierce, impetuous descent. Peter now realized that he had been dreaming away the days of his journey lost in the spirit of the sea and in the memories of the strange girl whose future might depend upon his success or failure in striking off the shackles of fear. To avert the haunting destiny, to dissipate the shadowing mystery that followed in her track, dealing its fatal dark thrusts in the dark to the men who played a part in her life had been a job he had begun badly.

Once more Peter reviewed the evidence already in his hands with the vague hope that from it a conclusion would suddenly stand forth, just as one again looks through a pile of papers for the twentieth time for one paper that the senses have proclaimed repeatedly is not there.

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As on other occasions when he weighed the fact he was not disposed to give weight to the idea that any secret band, acting perhaps under oath of vengeance or of loyalty, was exercising an influence upon the life of Brena Selcoss. Her father's connection with the secret society revolutionaries in Greece and the political plottings of her maternal grandfather, the famous Tom Vaughn, might have appeared to give some color to the idea, but Peter knew that the arm of a secret band, no matter how long it might be at its full development, no matter how it might deliver knife thrusts at the ends of the earth on behalf of a cause, withers quickly when its inspiration is gone. It was not likely that after a lapse of more than half a century the power of such an arm would survive nor that it would extend far away and across the years either to protect or blast the life of a girl, who, whatever she had since become in her wonderful development, was, at first, humble and forgotten and alone.

To be sure, Peter thought the last words of her father had made reference to an unnamed assurance that if Brena were to be menaced, a protecting force

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would aid her. These, however, were the words of an impractical dreamer who having failed to provide against all dangers to his orphaned daughter might naturally enough, when facing death, have voiced a vehement faith, hoping that it would help to make up in part for a lack of works. Peter put this evidence behind him as belonging to that class of improbabilities that only those who love to make more mystery rather than to lessen it, seize with all the joy of the amateur secret service men who had amused Peter so much during the war.

The vital facts as Peter saw them were to be found among those which attended the disappearance of men—men of different types who at moments some years apart had sunk to the bottom of non-existence like two plummets.

One of these men, Jim Hennepin, had gone to his end without fear; he had only shown excitement. He had hinted that some call or message of great advantage had come to him. At the time he left he had given, apparently without intention, a scrap of paper bearing the symbolic figure of the feathered snake—the Kuk-ul-can, god of the Mayan



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civilization. According to Parmalee, who not only had been much in the desert country but who was a student of its history and a collector of books bearing upon its antiquities, the appearance of this symbol suggested the Southwestern United States or Mexico.

When, however, Parmalee himself had disappeared less than four years later it was at the end of a long period in which he indicated beyond doubt that he had some knowledge, however vague, of the danger that threatened him. Peter had often on his voyage across the Atlantic, squeezed all the conclusions possible from the facts bearing upon whether Parmalee feared a known enemy or one unknown. Brena's strange husband at times indicated a fear of a known and human agency; when he had shot at an imaginary intruder in their New York apartment he had said, "I thought it was him," a remark that he had afterward explained by saying he referred to the burglar that he believed had entered. Parmalee's violent objection to the exhibition of Brena's portrait with her name attached might well have been the objection of a man who feared that

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some one by chance seeing the picture and recognizing it would trace the original by inquiries addressed to the artist.

What had it meant that this extraordinary man had surrounded his life with defenses as if forewarned of his fate? He employed only servants he knew, he built defensive walls, put up bars at his windows, retained the chauffeur, Paul, because the man would be handy with his fists in an emergency, he bought a fanged mongrel beast to roam about the grounds at night. He lived in a terror which burned his nerves and chilled his heart, that drove him jibbering to the bottle and he indicated more than once that this was all due to his wife—that it was she who dragged this trail of unknown horror.

But when he had gone—vanished without trace, he, like Jim Hennepin, went willingly.

What was the bait? In Hennepin's case it had been money. This could not have drawn Parmalee.

Peter got up and looked out over the city sweltering in the purple hazy summer night, blinking its

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yellow eyes as if these eyes were full of salty perspiration.

Well, the two men had gone willingly and had thereafter disappeared as completely as wisps of smoke in a tempest or raindrops on the sea. Some force drew them, Peter told himself, some force that perhaps was capable of calling craftily to that which in each man would respond. Parmalee had pretended to some knowledge of what this force was. How did he know?

Peter walked back to the dark oak mantel and opening his wallet that lay there he took out the sheet of paper which had told him of his own danger. There was the explanation! Parmalee too had been warned. But in spite of that warning he too had gone—had been dissolved, had been wiped out like a tiny chalk mark by a giant thumb.

And what conclusion could be drawn from all of this—all that Peter knew? He saw it suddenly. He had been tumbling over and over again into the error that pitfalls so many of his countrymen; he wanted to assume the facts upon which a conclusion is to be based. Often he had seen the same delusive

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yearning when a political leader with noble sentiments and high-sounding purposes based his program upon a world not as it is but as good men would like to have it and tolled, after him, those persons who liked to call themselves idealists! He had seen so much conclusion that would have been right if only it could have been based upon the facts! Peter knew now, as if by a sudden humiliating revelation, that he had been foolish to even attempt the method of the great analysts, as they are called, who are always conveniently provided with every vital fact beforehand; he knew that what he must get was more evidence.

On his key ring he looked for the key to Parmalee's house up the Hudson.

He had forgotten perhaps another failing of some of his countrymen; as Peter once said himself, they founded beliefs upon the wish to believe; it never was suggested to DeWolfe that in spite of its extravagance, any part of the story told by Brena Selcross might not be true.

He loved her.

#### XIV

PETER, who had presented Brena's letter to the caretaker of the Parmalee estate and had received a few sullen references to the fact that the place was a great bother and was said by many persons in the village to be a house of evil influences, had been directed up the long hill under an archway of dripping trees and stood at last at the very gate which Parmalee in his alcoholic fury had shaken as he invited his imaginary persecutors to attack him.

The change in the weather, brought about by the sudden turning landward of a heavy Atlantic storm, had transformed midsummer into chill, wet March. The cold, damp wind swept across the top of the hill, tossing the arms of the trees within the walled enclosure to which the gate gave entrance, so that these arms appeared to be assaulting the French roof of the square gloomy old house, as if that house had committed some crime. Weeds and rank growth had sprung up along the wall and behind the gate in the

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crevices of the flagstones of the walk; each stalk, bending with the night's rain, shed drops of water like a weeping mourner. Peter, having glanced up at the windows behind which Brena had heard the winds of winter whine and complain and had watched the pale moon throw dancing shadows on the dank lawn, felt his own skin shrink in response to the thought of all that a young girl must have suffered here. He would square the account for her!

The squeak of the caretaker's key in the rusty lock of the gate started up a dozen crows, cawing madly as if driven from some carrion feast. When Peter had used Brena's key to unlock the front door, hideous with its black walnut carvings and its stained and leaded glass, the odor of dust and decay filled his nose as with a dry and suffocating powder. Without volition of his own his ears strained to hear some sound, some retreating footsteps, some whispered voice in that house, but none came; the place was as still as a dry cave. In this stillness, in the smell of the dead air, there was the faint tremor of fear as if fear once having taken abode in this gloomy old residence, was not to be evicted,

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as if indeed it clung when all other personalities had gone just as the odor of dead smoke remains long after the living fire has grown cold.

With a gesture of impatience Peter closed the door behind him and walked toward the foot of the long, austere flight of black walnut stairs. He could see from his position the gray light coming through barred windows into the dining-room where on the table—a beautiful Chippendale, strangely out of place in the unpleasant, high studded proportions of the room—there sat a saucer with a spoon in it as if some ghostly presence had just that moment arisen from a lonely bowl of phantom gruel. The door nearer the front of the house, the entrance no doubt to the library of Parmalee, was almost closed; Peter glanced at it and ascended the stairs.

A thin film of dust covered everything. It was evidence of the caretaker's belief that no one would quickly return to note his delinquencies. Otherwise the house might have been untouched from the moment when, in a spirit of pursued flight, Brena had shut the doors for the last time. A novel had been put upon a table in the upper hall, its pages spread

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downward where a reader had left it; in Brena's own chamber the tray upon the dressing table still contained scattered pins and a railroad conductor's receipt for a cash fare. In the bathroom a towel hung over the edge of the tub as if a bather had just come from the morning plunge and only the stripped beds spoke of the vacancy of the hollow-sounding rooms. To Peter, the whole house except for that part which she had occupied, seemed to be filled with unpleasant ghosts of the personalities that had lived in it. He opened no door without the feeling that one of these invisible beings had just stepped out of the chamber from another exit. The stairs up which he had climbed were complaining gently, as if feet were following his; somewhere there sounded the fluttering of soft wings—a startling noise, but explained by the dead chimney swallow that lay below the sill of one of the darkened windows—a tiny inert symbol of tragic imprisonment and death.

Peter had found nothing in his survey of the house that could contribute to his purpose; he had looked without more reason for looking than a



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desire to see where Brena had lived and to confirm his belief that except in the library that had been used by Parmalee nothing could be found of any significance. It was not probable, he thought, that he would open some door to find the cotton broker's withering corpse stretched out with the handle of a murderer's knife still sticking up from the collapsed ribs. He was about to return to the lower floor when he saw in front of him upon the bare dusty varnished boards a distinct print of a human foot. It was a small, well-formed foot that had made this print—and the next beyond and the next—until they stopped where the stair carpet began.

There sprang into his mind the gibbering reference of Parmalee to footprints, followed immediately by the thought that these might be the record of Brena's own steps and then as quickly by the thought that Brena had left long before this layer of dust had accumulated. He found himself listening now, the victim for the moment of fear, as if suddenly the contagion had reached him. At last he laughed. The prints were not those of a man: they might be those of a woman but the chances

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were overwhelmingly in favor of their being made by the caretaker's young barefoot boy. Peter smiled again and went down the stairs.

At the bottom of this flight above the hall stand was an old carved Chinese frame holding a dusty mirror. Peter glanced at this mirror, saw himself, stopped. The expression on his own face alarmed him. He imagined that he was less ruddy, more gray of skin, that he had caught himself in the unconscious pose of a man who involuntarily has begun to walk softly and look about alertly, that upon the face reflected in the glass was the first faint expression of terror written not as it is written upon the face of a man who is a coward before known dangers, for Peter whatever he might be could never wear that look, but the dim suggestion of fear of unknown dangers and of subtle influences, that may some day be engraved without regard to the courage or will of the individual upon any sensitive human countenance.

Peter had an unpleasant idea; it was that his subconscious self was endeavoring to transmit to his conscious self some message of warning. For the

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first time he felt the need to summon to his aid his clearest thought, his most alert state of mind, his keenest observations.

Fortunately perhaps this moment of realization came to him as he opened the door of Parmalee's study. It commanded him to squeeze out of his first visit to that square chamber, lined with books to the ceiling in the style of old-fashioned libraries, the most that orderly investigation could disclose.

That many things had been disturbed since the moment when Parmalee had walked out into oblivion was evident. The correspondence on the large desk in the center of the room had been gathered into a neat pile and tied with string; the papers once held by a waste basket, now empty, had been poured into the open fireplace and most of them burned. The chairs had been covered with newspapers by some one without a sense of values sufficient to suggest covering also rare books, their pages exposed now to insects and some of their splendid bindings to mildew and dry rot. The study had the air of having been cleaned and straightened.

Peter tried the drawers of the desk. Some of

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them had swollen with the damp, but none were locked; they were filled with catalogues, pamphlets and with clippings in envelopes arranged in alphabetical order. A deep drawer at the bottom contained several account books, many packages of canceled bank checks bound with elastic bands now dried and crumbling under the touch. On the whole Peter, who had Brena's permission to examine anything he found, saw at first no interest in these private papers, unless when time elapsed so that Parmalee after another three years could be declared legally dead, an executor might find value in them as a record of the financial affairs of the vanished man. No doubt his lawyer had seen many of them already.

For the correspondence, however, Peter had a greater interest. He drew it toward him, untied the string, and having stopped to survey the room again from the chair that once had known for so many restless hours of panic and suffering, the warmth of Parmalee's living body, began to go hastily over the letters there.

They were not illuminating. If they represented

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the mail that Parmalee received they suggested only the life of a man who has separated himself from his friends or who had not acquired friends. One or two from France and England expressed graceful or formal messages of those who had known this strange American as a liberal host and a skillful and diplomatic impresario for his beautiful young wife who had made something of a small clatter in interesting social corners in Europe and then had gone. Otherwise this mail was the miscellany received by a man whose personality had no power to be loved or remembered, who was on the mailing lists of book dealers and others desirous of reaching a man of means by personal letters addressed to his weaknesses or his vanities. Occasionally Parmalee had drawn from some university professor a reply to inquiries made in the interest of the book he had been writing. There were a few letters from stock brokers as to investment changes, and a few bills.

One of these bills was the only piece of matter that gave Peter the slightest interest. It was from the famous old John Henry Wycoff of Baltimore of

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whose death Peter had read by chance, a man remembered only among those who are book collectors, a dealer whose black coat was always covered with dandruff and who left a third of a million dollars. This bill was for two thousand eight hundred of these dollars—an account that had probably been settled by Parmalee's attorney, Lanfrew. It was something of a bill for one book—a book described as Kolb's privately reprinted version of the J suit MSS. entitled "Explorations of Father Carlos in Mescalero Desert," shipped via registered post on 18th inst. Below this statement of account were the words, "Please see letter." There were two pin holes at the corner of the paper as if Wycoff had attached his letter to the bill.

Peter thought it would be interesting to see a book, so obscure, that was worth nearly three thousand dollars. He even wondered what plausible explanation the old dealer had given. His letter, however, was now missing.

Peter was about to put the matter out of his mind when he saw the date of the bill. He held up the fingers of one hand and counted upon them with the

forefinger of the other. Then suddenly he got up from the chair and began a rapid search of the top of the desk. He did not find the letter there.

He turned to the waste basket; it was empty. He had forgotten that its contents had been dumped into the fireplace and when he remembered, it was with chagrin that he saw the ashes matted down by the rains that had come down the flue and only a few unburned scraps here and there powdered over with fallen soot. Kneeling down on the hearth he pulled out a great number of these bits of torn paper that had fallen out of reach of the flames.

Peter was rewarded for his search by two bits of paper no larger than calling cards upon which, much faded, was the same old-fashioned, irregular typing that had appeared in the bill. On one of them was the "Yours most truthfully" of John Henry Wycoff; on the other torn scrap the words "reluctant to present but you" and below "Only this justifies" and "the owner though aware of your possession of the imperfect copy, accordingly he" and "not in your confidence."

Peter spoke aloud; he said: "Parmalee wanted

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that book badly." He looked again at the date of the bill. "I wonder if this was the zeal of a collector who has a passion for perfect copies."

The words defined a thought for Peter. It would be interesting to see whether "The Explorations of Father Carlos in Mescalero Desert" had disappeared with Parmalee when he had answered his strange impulse to go to some unnamed destination. Peter turned toward the library shelves and then with the thought that a search among these volumes would be saved if he found a catalogue he went again to the desk. The copy of the book was there—under two or three other books,—a handsomely bound volume of large pages whose thick paper rather than the length of text gave it bulk.

The book had been printed in English in 1830 from copies of manuscripts of Jesuits that with other records had been lost in the destruction of the mission church in Los Banos in 1812. The work was a beautiful piece of bookmaking in perfect preservation and Peter, though interested in quaint descriptions of this old missionary who had braved the terrors of thirst and heat to penetrate the coun-



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try along the eastern border of New Mexico, was admiring also the rare skill and beauty of the pages when he suddenly came upon a hiatus in its continuity. Page thirty-two began a description of the Lost Pueblo, where according to legend a city whose age was of centuries had been ended as a punishment for failing to worship the god of water. A scourge of thirst had been visited upon the degenerate Indian dwellers who had been so long protected by the terrors that the waterless desert must have had for more warlike tribes who would otherwise have attacked them. The well around which the pueblo had been built—the very life of the people—had been dried up in one night by a miracle.

“Many and curious are the carvings upon the walls of this Lost Pueblo. To copy them and their heathenish devices I was sorely tempted and would have done so had time been given me,” said Father Carlos. “Especially I noted a figure of great size upon the wall that faces the setting sun, for this was a serpent with feathers like a bird, a figure such as is seen never but in the lands to the south and beyond the Great River. While waiting for day I

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drew the lines of the journey we had made which I here set down again for the guidance of others. On the coming of morn we went toward the purple vapors of the——”

Peter had turned to the next page. It began: “These accounts of treasure are but the poor speculations of the ignorant. Long after the sandstorms have covered the pretentious dwelling places of man such perversity will endure that worldly avarice will conjure into belief the tradition of fools.” This was not page thirty-three but page thirty-seven. The pages between were gone.

For a moment DeWolfe was puzzled. This was not a perfect copy. After a moment’s reflection he felt the humiliation of stupidity. Of course the copy he was examining was the imperfect volume that Parmalee had owned originally: the one sent by Wycoff probably would be found in its place on the shelves where Brena’s husband had put it—one of the last acts he ever did in that house. Peter, arising, walked along the rows of books looking at the titles; in less than three minutes he had found

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the other copy of the quaint old book and taken it down.

He blew the dust off the once gilded top of its pages and as he did so he noticed that at one place the pages did not quite press close together. The volume fell open there—at page thirty-seven. The two preceding leaves of the book had been torn out!

He went back to the desk chair, sat down, thrust his feet out straight before him and whistled.

After a few moments he opened the first copy of "Father Carlos" again and read over the paragraphs on page thirty-two. He scowled, put the book down again, and, getting up, paced around the desk just as Parmalee, as a caged animal, had paced around it in squares during his restless, sleepless nights of fear.

"Serpent with feathers like a bird," he said as one who desires to hear the words so that their meaning shall be more clear. He was thinking of the scrap of paper in his pocket—that scrap of paper that Jim Hennepin had left inadvertently with Brena when she saw him for the last time, that scrap of paper with the crudely drawn figure of the

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feathered serpent—the god, Kuk-ul-can—and the two scrawled words, “This Sign.”

He took out this scrap and walking to a window, with its barred grating through which the gray east wind was hurling more rain against the spattered panes, he examined the handwriting. With the manner of a guilty man engaged in some nefarious and shameful performance, he drew forth Brena’s letter of introduction addressed to Lanfrew, the attorney, opened it, and holding the two pieces of writing side by side glanced from one to the other. The capital S in the word “Sign” was not like hers. And yet——

He paced again, thinking; then uttering an exclamation, he pulled open the lower drawer of the desk and took out a handful of Parmalee’s canceled checks. Shifting one behind the other, he went on hurriedly glancing at the dates until he had found one for eighty dollars made payable to “Brena Selcoss Parmalee.”

Almost viciously he slapped this one over onto its face and stared down at the endorsement on the back. “Pay to Bearer, Brena Selcoss Parmalee.”

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"That will do," he said, and thrust it in his pocket.

He returned to the lower drawer again, threw out upon the desk top the many little books that his casual observation had determined were Compton Parmalee's private books of account.

"Let's see—seven years," said Peter. "This one may do. Nineteen twelve. And this one. Nineteen eleven."

Opening the first, he began a search of its entries. For more than three hours he went over the items in the rough accounting system of Parmalee.

At the end of his amateur audit he thrust the books under his arm, looked at his watch, left the library, took his wet hat and overcoat, and before he went out of the house, he stopped for a moment to listen to the hush within its four evil walls and to the whine of the wind outside. The Chinese mirror again reflected his own countenance and the countenance of the man who walked out from the stifling, musty, dead air into the cold, salt-scented wind was the countenance of a troubled man.

There was time to see Lanfrew if he could catch

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a train for New York without too much delay, and if good fortune would hold the lawyer in his office. Peter wanted to get from the last man who talked with Parmalee one fact that had perplexed him. So much did he want to put an end to doubts which had grown that when he had reached the city and gone downtown on a subway express and had stood at the mahogany rail in the office until he had heard that Lanfrew was there, he walked through and over the protests of a young law clerk, directly into the room of the head of the firm.

DeWolfe, with his own characteristic vividness of expression, had once said, "There are three kinds of lawyers—silky pomeranians, lean foxes and bull dogs." Lanfrew was distinctly a bull dog.

He was short with a head too large for his body and his shoulders stooped as if the weight of that head had been too great. The hair that tumbled around on his head, wherever it was left by the thrust, the pluckings, the twistings and the ruffling of his nervous, knotty fingers, was still almost free from streaks of gray, although the lines in his face were deep and spoke of his age. His lower jaw was

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eternally thrust forward and was eternally in motion as if the man was muttering to himself endless imprecations upon life, existence, fellow men and the vanities of the world. His face was that kind of face which a great tragedian would have found a comfort and an asset, but like a bull dog's it appeared ready to open its square iron jaws and fasten them into some one's throat.

Lanfrew spoke no sentence that he did not begin with a low growl; he gave the impression to his clients, perhaps by intention, that he was the personification of wrath and of reckonings, and the fierce instrument of a terrible and brutal justice. This was worth many thousands a year to him.

When he had read Brena's letter, he tossed it on the desk and, glowering at Peter, he said, "Well?"

"I came to ask——" DeWolfe began.

"Yes?" the other interrupted with a growl.

Peter pointed at the letter.

"I know," snarled Lanfrew. "I'm at your service."

"You were the last man who ever saw Compton Parmalee," Peter began.

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"He came to draw an instrument in my office."

"A will?"

"Yes."

"Which leaves to his widow——?"

"The man isn't legally dead yet," Lanfrew said severely.

"He has been—say gone—for several years."

"Apparently wiped out. Yes. And there is nothing more to be done. We did all humanly possible. We exhausted every means except that of a nasty publicity. It's futile. The wise know when there are limitations. I know. It is folly for you to waste your time. Where did you meet Mrs. Parmalee—old friend?"

"I met her in London."

The old lawyer arose, thrust his jaw out as if making it flexible and ready to bite, and stared for a long time at Peter.

"Are you the son of DeWolfe of the Equity?"

"Yes."

"Let it alone."

"What alone?"

"This affair. Let sleeping dogs lie. You are



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a young man of—well—I know who you are. Used to know your father. I can talk to you confidentially. I'll say this—Parmalee was a client sent up to me by our Texas correspondents, and as far as I am concerned I wouldn't care a snitchet if I had never seen him."

Peter nodded.

"You saw the last of him."

Lanfrew looked out the window at the harbor that appeared to stretch out like a woolly gray blanket from the bases of monument buildings; he wheeled suddenly upon DeWolfe.

"He came here that day—the last. He had tickets for some place and spoke of taking his wife, but he was excited. He spoke of an alternative. He drank. You know that?"

"Was he——?"

"No; he was nervous, excited."

"As if afraid?"

"No."

Peter thought a moment before he said, "Would you say he was thinking of suicide?"

"No, I wouldn't," replied Lanfrew batting the

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tassel of the window curtain with his stubby fingers. "He had something else on his mind. He spoke vaguely. I didn't give a damn what he had on his mind. It was something. He spoke as if it were some errand—like a man who had received a message."

"What kind of a message?"

"I don't know. I got the impression—mind you now and mark me well, I don't say it was so—I got the impression that he was engaged in some—what shall I say?—investigation."

"Investigation?" repeated DeWolfe in a startled voice.

Lanfrew nodded his bull dog head up and down as if there were oiled bearings in his invisible short neck.

"He left no word for his wife?" Peter asked, shooting the question when Lanfrew's eyes had met his.

He saw the lawyer flinch.

"I asked whether he left any message for his wife?"

The other man coughed, felt under his heavy chin

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for his concealed throat and sat down in his desk chair.

"To be frank with you, he did," he said. "This of course is confidential. It was too brutal to give her."

Peter leaned forward. He said, "Too brutal?"

Lanfrew said, "Yes. He said to me, 'If I make up my mind not to take her away—if I go on a little journey myself, you tell her that I'll be back in two weeks. You tell her I'm going to cut a knot—that I'm going to relieve the hell I've been living.' "

The two men sat silently looking at each other.

"Of course I thought he'd telegraph her," said Lanfrew argumentatively. "I didn't take his message seriously. It wouldn't have done her any good to tell her that brutal message, eh? And later? Well, I put the thing off. It cleared no mystery. It was inconsequential."

Peter asked, "Then you thought he blamed her?"

Lanfrew threw up his hands, a gesture which said, "There is no question."

"For what?" asked Peter.

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Lanfrew chewed upon an imaginary mouthful; he said finally: "God knows. Some women—beautiful women—are poisonous. Rare cases. They carry a deadly poison, DeWolfe. Some influence, some bane, some corrosive withering, devilish, fatal fluid or vapor or aura—whatever you choose. Who knows what it is? But she—that woman—when you find her, will blast a man like——"

He stopped.

Peter drew a deep breath. He said almost incredulously, "Did you tell me that you got the impression from Mr. Parmalee that he was going to investigate something?"

"Yes. Been invited to investigate something," the lawyer said.

DeWolfe stared at the carpet. After a pause he got up and held out his hand.

"Let this alone," said Lanfrew. "But of course if you want anything else, come in again."

Peter went home to his apartment.

He found there an envelope brought by a messenger from the office of Pennington, Gould and



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Goodhue. It contained a cable from Brena, overseas.

“Do not go any deeper, I beg you. I am in mortal fear,” it said. “I am coming to America. All my love.”

## XV

By afternoon on Friday Peter had acquired certain information that he had sought.

His father had often been criticized by smaller or less successful men on the ground that he had little ability of his own, that he made his way up on the labors and the resourcefulness of his employees, his advisers, his lieutenants. Peter had heard this criticism from men who believed that the younger DeWolfe, with his nonchalant disregard for all the conventional forms of success, with his independence and originality, had much more native ability than his father: but Peter had always answered that no man was a good general unless he could mobilize and utilize the efforts of other men. A man who could choose the best cabinet would have nine-tenths of the requirements necessary for a great President, he said. And he often recalled the habit of mind of his father saying to himself

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not "What would he have done?" but "Who would he have sent for?" Old DeWolfe had left with Peter the epigram, "Always get the best, no matter what it costs, and, above all, get the best man."

Now that he had need of three experts he had conducted a careful inquiry as to the most infallible men available for his purposes. He was able to pay them for the work he proposed that they should do and he felt a satisfaction when the three had been picked out upon the judgment of shrewd men for whose opinion he had spent twenty-four hours. He laughed a little over the idea that destiny had cast him in the rôle of a sleuth and that he was doing his utmost to act more like a hard-headed director of a business to be done, than he had ever acted in his life before; it was not much like being the romantic detective, after all.

In addition to acquiring the information that would lead him to three men, Peter had wrestled with the problem presented by Brena's cable. He had sent her word when he had arrived safely in New York that he was full of hope and optimism. "We shall win," he had said, "because any other

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thought is too terrible to bear." He could not understand then what new facts she had to justify her strange message to him unless it were an anonymous warning such as that which he had received in Liverpool. To accede to her request and to proceed no further along the lines of inquiry which he had chosen as significant would mean delay and perhaps a loss of the thin threads that he had picked up to unravel.

To have cabled Brena that she must seek the aid of the office of the British Admiralty in procuring prompt passage across the water would have served Peter's inclination. He had suffered from that extraordinary pang that comes with parting and with the groundless and yet apparently prophetic intuition that the one who is loved the most will never be seen again. He had felt the pain of emptiness without her; he had felt the hunger for the close presence of her spirit, her mind and the touch of her tender hand from which there flowed so marvelous a current of strength and well being. It would have been easy for DeWolfe to have abandoned temporarily the task he had undertaken, which



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he might do in all good conscience and with the complete absolution from any obligation that her cable had given him.

The truth was, however, that he had in him a great deal of the fiber of determination, a good deal of a single-track purpose that frowned upon him and made him wince when he became tempted to postpone his plans and indulge his desire in waiting idly for her to come. He knew from the beginning that this was the side of self that would win; he was only doing that which he knew in his inner consciousness he would do when he cabled a reply to her that said, "Do not come yet. I will cable you again. If you have important news do not be afraid to send it."

He was glad when that was done. There was an additional reason for it; he was not yet prepared to meet Brena Selcoss for the second time. He must first clear the way for relationship that had in it no reservations.

The first thing to be done was to confer with one Joseph Smallwood of Drennan and Co., the publishers.

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When Peter first saw Smallwood he felt a little like one who has been sent to an armless dentist. The man was pale and flavorless like the cream sauce of cheap restaurants. He sat behind a desk in a corner of the publisher's office, screened off from the bustle of messengers, proofreaders, stenographers with an absurd fat publisher's list bound in green open before him, turning its pages with fingers that had the blue appearance of a cold storage chicken, his transparent eyelids drooped as if his profession were that of overcoming an intense desire for sleep. DeWolfe had difficulty in believing that this was the man to whom he had been referred.

"Mr. DeWolfe, how can I serve you?" he said in a low drawl as if he were pulling his words like molasses candy into long strips to match his own long body.

"I understand that you not only maintain a connection with Drennan but undertake commissions and pass upon technical questions independently."

Smallwood's smile was of the kind that snaps on and off like an electric light. Now he snapped it on; it was gone in a flash—a string-pulled smile.

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"Oh, yes," he said wearily. "Did you want to find——"

"A book," said Peter.

"What book?"

"'The Explorations of Father Carlos in the Mes-calero Desert.' Here is the whole story." Peter gave him a card with the details. "I want to buy a perfect copy."

Smallwood shook his head from left to right and then to left again with a sad expression followed by the camera shutter smile.

"It will take a long time," he said tenderly as if he bore the weight of all human suffering upon his heart. "It is a very rare book; Anderson, the sugar refiner, owned a copy. That is how I happened to know. I appraised his library. Perhaps it will take a year."

"A week," said Peter. "No more."

"A week," repeated Smallwood, closing his eyes as if resigned to anything, come what would.

"I thought it would be possible to telegraph to every dealer in the country."

"Please don't interrupt," the other said in a

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whisper as if Peter had clattered into some funeral service. "I am thinking."

When he had ceased thinking he looked up, snapped on his smile and stared at DeWolfe out of pale blue eyes.

"The operation will cost a great deal of money."

Peter waved his hand.

"The book is a rarity but not one that the dealers know how to locate—as for instance, a first edition of Horace Walpole, where the location of every copy is known."

Peter nodded.

"I think I better say——" began Smallwood who appeared discouraged. He paused, he repeated: "I think I better say, however, that I will make a trial provided——"

"That I am able to bear any expense?"

Smallwood appeared surprised that any human being could have as much sense. He said: "The search will require several stenographers, a long-distance telephone bill of rather alarming size and possibly a price for the book far beyond its real

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value—several times the probable amount it would bring at an auction.”

“Go ahead,” said Peter.

“May I say that the—your desire for a copy of this book must be extraordinary?”

“Oh, yes, most extraordinary. A week ago I would not have paid two dollars for it. Men have gambled away their lives on it. I can’t tell how much I want it until I get it. But to get it I will pay what it costs.”

The authority on obscure and rare volumes took off his glasses, wiped them with a new dollar bill and putting them on again stared at Peter. He drawled:

“I am not sure that your desire is a folly. It may be comparable to a desire for a personal and unique identity that makes only one woman in the world appear worth seeking. And I suppose that is why fine tastes differ from coarse tastes; the latter are not only coarse, but they do not know what it means to insist upon the one thing that the desire calls for, rejecting every compromise and every substitute.”

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Peter nodded. "Thank you—you have furnished me with an idea. And if you can locate a copy of the book——?"

"I would let you know at once."

"Time counts. I would be grateful."

Smallwood blinked. Only when his visitor was at the door did he say, with a switched-on smile: "Oh, by the way, must the volume be in perfect condition?"

"It can be a bundle of *débris* as far as I am concerned," answered Peter. "But all the pages must be there."

The other man was reaching for the telephone instrument with his cold storage fingers as DeWolfe left the office.

From the publishers he went to one Manfred Eldegard at 6 Nassau Street. Eldegard is a public accountant whose clients are the surety and bonding companies. The vice-president of one of these companies had said to DeWolfe: "You are not familiar with auditing and accounting as I am, Peter. If you were you would know that accuracy, honesty, speed, reliability are qualities that can be

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hired in carload lots. It is easy to engage experts in figures. But the genius among accountants is the man who can read figures just as a pianist reads music. That man is worth something because he can translate into the terms of life. He doesn't check up your books. He plays them for you. You can tell how they sound. He can bend over the figure on a corporation's account and smell the truth about the company. If he wants to catch a defaulter he can tell by looking at the red edges of a journal's pages whether one has been there. He is not a mathematician; he's a magician. There's one of those fellows that can make circles round the rest. Here's his letter head."

"Is he willing to take a chance on getting shot?" Peter had asked.

"Shot?" the other had repeated with a gasp.

"I may have to send him a long way off. I don't know what hazards there are."

The official of the bonding company had looked at Peter incredulously but he had said, "You'll have to ask him or his wife. I understand that there are few witnesses for the State in criminal trials who

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have weathered as many blackmail and black-hand threats as M. E. as we call him."

• "Would he be more ready to keep his mouth shut for his client than to open it to the police for instance?"

"My dear sir, when you engage Eldegard you buy a strip of his services. It's yours. If you don't want him to disclose anything there is no process server that can land him and if there were there is no district attorney who would get anything out of cross-examination except evasions."

Upon a confirmation of this opinion Peter had chosen this fat man with two chins, a pompadour of bristles above a broad flat face with little eyes, nose and mouth pricked into it as if by a point of a pencil; to him Peter, following the appointment he had made, stated his problem.

"Where are these accounts?" asked Eldegard.

Peter put them upon the glass top of the desk. The little beady eyes of the fat man fixed a stare upon the Russia leather covers; he extended a large meaty hand and caressed these books as if they were a delicacy brought to him to cook and eat—a pleas-



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ure of digestion—a mere morsel for a gourmand.

“May I look?” he asked.

“Certainly,” Peter replied.

Eldegard pulled up his sleeves, pushed back his cuffs, habits that were relics of the days when he was a bookkeeper for a St. Louis brewery, of days when he did not dream of owning a summer place on Long Island and blooded Jersey cattle and a limousine for his Laura. As he turned the pages marked by Peter he began to utter chu-chu, chu-chu between his teeth, increasing its speed as if getting up steam as a locomotive puffs faster and faster when it leaves a train shed.

“What’s this Credit Account X.D.?” he inquired under his breath.

“That’s the one that occurs most often,” said Peter.

Eldegard drummed with his cushioned fingertips on the glass.

“It looks that way,” he announced, “—the way you said.”

“But you are not sure?”

“Only sure as a man is sure who finds watercress

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in his milk. To be sure we would have to check against the transactions in the local Cotton Exchange. Some of these are New Orleans houses. This X.D. was a private individual."

DeWolfe looked at the expert searchingly. He said: "Do you see anything else?"

"Yes—some one has been here before us. Perhaps it was you, eh?"

"No," replied Peter. "What do you see?"

"I see that some one who had a reason has put copy paper and carbons under these pages and copied these handwriting entries by running a stylus over the original entries. Sometimes the carbon and paper went askew; that's why you see these little blue marks. Did you think it extraordinary that I observed that?"

"Oh, no," said Peter. "Not at all. How could I? It was the first thing that made me wonder about the story these figures can tell. When can you go?"

"Go? Me? In person?"

"Yes. New Orleans—wherever the trail leads?"

Eldegard shook his head like a great Buddha with a pivoted neck. "Never," he said. "I'm too busy."

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"Isn't it your office force that is busy?" asked DeWolfe, throwing his cigarette into the bronze ash tray. "Besides as for the money—that is for you to say. Whatever is necessary to get your services."

"It isn't money," Eldegard answered. "If I'd paid any attention to money I wouldn't be worth fifty thousand to-day. No, it's Laura—Mrs. Eldegard. We've got a screened-in porch; we play checkers every evening."

"And so on," said Peter describing with a phrase the whole texture of a great fabric of companionship each thread of which was a homely commonplace, the whole a magic cloth of gold.

"Yes," said the other. "And so on. How did you know? You never lived it?"

"I intend to," said Peter solemnly.

Eldegard burst into uproarious laughter. "Say!" he exclaimed with a manner of speech that like all other natural expressions of this fat man had been a rock of Gibraltar against which the assaults of culture had bounded off. "Say! I'd like to tackle this."

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He slapped the back of one of the Russian leather books as one would slap a friend on the back.

"It's a story!" he said. "A fascinating trail."

"I think it is a story—a true story," DeWolfe agreed. "A thriller."

Eldegard considered.

"Blessed if I don't ask Ma—ask her if I can go."

He spoke as if it were a permission to go to the swimming hole or the circus.

"Thank you," said Peter. "I recognize the presence of good sportsmanship. I never expected to see it in the field of auditing."

"Huh!" Eldegard ejaculated. "I like a little fun; that's the trouble with us downtown New Yorkers; we don't have enough fun. I'd have gone to war if the Army would let me. I was too old and too fat. I lied about my age but when I told 'em I was thin they wouldn't believe it."

He picked up the two books. He said: "Leave 'em with me, and telephone me to-morrow, and I'll let you know what Ma says."

"I'll telephone to-morrow," said Peter.

## XVI

ON Sunday evening, after he had dined early with Colby Pennington, in one of the great deserted dining-rooms of a certain New York club, Peter felt the sense of revolt against the rut-running life of his own kind. The groove that fortune had provided for him was smooth but it was deep. Its customs, like the rules of some labor unions, were designed, purposed and intended to reduce individual expressions to a common level. It was type life.

Peter could remember his first sense of its pain. The initial, deep, agonizing twinge had come when he was thirteen. From the time he was ten and until he was fourteen he had owned a cat-boat. He had been the skipper of that cat; the mate was Mike. Mike's real name was August. He was eighteen and the freckles on his face were frequent and deep of color. He had a hare-lip, a good heart, and Peter had loved him and hid that love. But Mike and the cat-boat with its cruising quarters for two were the

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real reasons why Peter was always so anxious to have the family go to their waterfront estate on the Long Island shore. On the morning of his fourteenth birthday his father, clad in nightclothes, had awakened him and dragged him to a second-story balcony of their villa. He had rubbed his eyes to see more clearly a steam yacht, slim, white, beautiful, varnished, gleaming with polished brass, manned by a crew of several men in uniform; it had come up to the private moorings during the night.

"Yours," his father had said. "A birthday."

And then and there came the realization that the days of the cat-boat had gone, that Mike would never be the same again, that boyhood freedom had gone, that great toys that he did not want in his heart of hearts were now to be his, that the obligation of riches had put its giant hand upon him bending his free spirit into formal postures and like a vampire putting its loathsome lips upon him to draw away the untrammelled expression of himself.

From Pennington, with his naturally brilliant mind, shackled in religion, in politics, in morals, in taste, by those schools of petty imitation misnamed

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Society and Respectability and Precedent, DeWolfe that evening had drawn a new draught of disgust. Poor Pennington, industrious, irreproachable, successful! For all his pains no nearer God: for all his labors no nearer to mankind. Even his restraints had not enlarged his soul; Peter was certain that if the lawyer would only commit one good dashing highway robbery he would be a better man.

He wondered what this successful professional man would say if he knew that under Peter's thigh a hard object was pressing into the flesh as they sat in the great hall with their coffee and watched club members slide here and there alone, like dyspeptic ghosts; he wondered what Pennington would do if he pulled out this automatic pistol as he was tempted to do, and stirred his coffee with its barrel. The reason that Peter did not do this was because when Pennington had said, "You are a fool to carry that thing," he could be sure that his attorney was wrong about it.

When he said good night to Pennington, there was still enough daylight for a walk alone to one of the little parks over near the East River. He

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remembered that, in France, his idea of the most wonderful moment in the world, the sharpest contrast to the gigantic nobilities and the colossal triviality of War, was a moment on a New York park bench with children of the tenements still playing in the dusk, perhaps with an organ and a monkey thrown in for good measure. Since then how life had changed for him. When he sat down the children in the dusk—the realities—faded away and were lost in unreal pictures of Brena in her Beconshire garden, perhaps with her great dark eyes turned toward the sunset because he had gone behind it.

He felt an extraordinary restlessness—like that which comes upon those who have been deprived of some drug and are in torture while it goes slowly out of the system. He who wished not to wait, was waiting. He felt the dread of unknown calamities. And with this haunting sense of hovering crisis, he turned back to his apartment.

There Peter tried to read, experiencing that irritating lack of concentration which comes to all readers whose minds steal away from the page allowing the eyes to travel on alone like independent



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animals photographing mere type without ideas, until whisked back by their master to the place where they had ceased to read and begun only to move across the lines of print. He put the book down. The romance did not hold him; he had come to the threshold of romantic realities. He had knocked upon a non-committal door. He was waiting for it to open.

It did in fact open—and quickly. Before nine, the old elevator man came rocking along the corridor on his long and his short leg and rang Peter's bell.

"There's a gentleman below, sir," he said. "I knew you was here, sir, but I told him I would see."

"What was his name?" asked DeWolfe.

"Smallwood, sir, Smallwood. A very sleepish man—a restful man, like."

"You never can tell by the first look," said Peter. "Sunday night! And Smallwood—bring him up."

The second meeting with the pale personality of the authority on books made him appear to Peter a few shades lighter in pallor. His eyes were almost mere colorless openings in a face of little more the

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color of a moonstone by contrast with the shell rims of his glasses. His free hand hung listless as if it were just out of refrigeration. He wore a suit of pale gray the pattern of which was so delicate that it might have been only the fancy of weak eyes. Smallwood looked as if he were something that had stood out through a rainy season.

"Here I am," he drawled.

"You don't mean——?" exclaimed Peter.

The other man in answer placed the package under his arm on Peter's long Jacobean table. The motion was almost surreptitious.

"Yes, I did find one," he drawled. "Not so far away either."

He looked up inquiringly into DeWolfe's expressive face, now swept by many emotions like puffs of wind scurrying across the surface of water.

"That's great!" Peter exclaimed. "It's great."

"Oh, how kind of you to say so," Smallwood said. "I found this to-day and I thought I would drop in with it."

He appeared about ready to lie down and go to sleep.

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"Look here," said Peter. "You know that was mighty kind, to come up here—and all that. I'll not forget it. Quite aside from the professional obligation."

Smallwood raised his cold storage hand as the orator does when pretending that applause is undeserved. The gesture also appeared to give Peter permission to inspect the prize. Off came the string and off the wrapping paper. Without a glance at the binding or title Peter flapped over the pages. Thirty, thirty-one, two, three, four, five. Thirty-six! Thirty-seven!

"All here!" exclaimed DeWolfe looking up, but as if even the pallor of Smallwood had faded out completely, the book collector's counselor had gone; he had closed the door noiselessly as if the paleness of him not only was for the sight but for the sense of hearing as well.

Peter pushed the third copy of the rare volume upon which he had put his hands under the arc of the bronze lamp.

"The way presents no obstacles to progress save the sand which is loose for the feet of horses,"

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Father Carlos, the Jesuit explorer, had written. "This region of fine sand blown by winds from the Mesa begins at the valley that we have called the Dry Cup and by me is so marked upon the drawing. Thence it runneth straight north for a distance of one hundred and five. Here was found a vast mound, some of our party saying below a great rock was to be found. The course from this mound is Northwest; one we have followed by great good fortune like a miracle, there being only impassable clefts in the plain to the right and to the left and only one entrance into the Great Cleft, where is the ruins of the City—part upon the level ground and part upon the southern wall of the Mesa."

Peter turned to the map drawn so quaintly by the painstaking priest nearly two centuries ago, "lest others unguided by the hand of God become lost."

At the end of twenty minutes of study DeWolfe stood erect and drew in a deep breath. These pages then were those which Parmalee had sought and found, the same as those which he had torn out of the book; they had been associated with some strange call. Was the call to that region or was the call

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something that followed his search for this quaint old volume and its possession?

To Peter it appeared now that one more piece of material was needed to fill the pattern. He had been reluctant to seek this piece but now there was too much confirmation to allow anything to stand in the way.

He could not wait; he took his hat. The evening was now filled with moonlight, so clear, upon white cloud banks on a purple velvet sky, that it invited all to walk leisurely under a spell of silvery calm that even transformed the rectangular prisms of the city and the deep streets between. Peter knew nothing of the moon; he pursued one end, blind to all else.

After hurrying on foot for two blocks he succeeded in stopping an empty taxicab that was clattering southward on the Avenue.

"Take me there," he said to the driver, putting a card in his hand.

The car turned about as if it had forgotten something uptown and after ten blocks on the asphalt, swung through a cross street to the car tracks upon which it purred like a brush on velvet until it turned

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around a hospital on a corner and found a block of old-fashioned brown-stone houses.

Up the long steps of one of them, Peter climbed, looking for a doctor's sign, and finding it there he rang the bell.

The man he had come to see met him in a typical doctor's office with its mingled and vague impressions of milky glass slabs, nickel instrument trays, the vicious appearance of a harmless nose and throat apparatus, books bound in dark red, scattered medical journals folded twice lengthwise, the sound of water dripping into a washbowl behind a white door and the faint smells of ether and aristol powder.

Peter gave no inspection to the man who received him; he began abruptly by stating his name.

The professional man, acting from habit, nodded, put on his glasses, took out a card-case and said in a carefully nurtured tone of sympathy:

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing is the matter," replied DeWolfe, "I'm not ill. I took a chance on finding you on Sunday evening. I know nothing of your office hours. Apparently I'm lucky."

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“Possibly.”

“I came to consult you in your other capacity.”

The other man got up: Peter could now see that he was a tall man who had neglected to shave that morning. He guessed that the practice of this physician did not flourish, but he sensed at once the vanity of the man the moment his second field of skill had been mentioned.

“Yes, I do a little of that, too,” the doctor said with fraudulent modesty.

“I should say so,” replied Peter. “Who do you suppose sent me here?”

“One of many lawyers, perhaps.”

“The district attorney.”

The doctor was plainly pleased. He said, “Well, handwriting has been my hobby, Mr. DeWolfe, for nearly twenty-two years. It began curiously enough by a triviality—an attempt to read character through penmanship; it has ended in a scientific inquiry, the development of method, a system of rhythm measurements. Scarcely a day goes by that I am not consulted by the prosecuting authorities in many

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cities. I testified in London in the famous Speere murder case."

"I was told," said Peter, "I was told that you were in advance of any other man in America with perhaps one exception. I came to you for that reason. I came for an opinion. For that opinion I will gladly pay the fee you ask, but I want to say to you that the result of your opinion will have the gravest bearing upon the lives of at least two persons."

"I do not give opinions," the other said severely, "I give facts. I guess at nothing. My reports are not speculations; they are statements."

Peter ejaculated one word: "Exactly!" He was nervous and he could not conceal it.

"Well?" said the doctor.

From his memoranda book DeWolfe took out two pieces of paper. One of them was that with the symbol of the feathered serpent and the two words "This Sign" which once had been in the possession of Jim Hennepin; the other was the check drawn by Compton Parmalee to the order of his wife, Brena Selcross Parmalee, which she had indorsed.



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He placed this indorsement up and not down as he put the two pieces of paper side by side upon the table.

"Huh!" said the doctor, bending over them.

Peter looked up at him sharply.

"That," said the doctor, putting a square-ended fore-finger upon the words "The Sign."

"What?" asked Peter.

"It is an excellent example of an attempt to disguise penmanship."

DeWolfe felt it necessary to contract his muscles to hold in an exclamation that had tried to leap from him.

"That is not the problem," said he.

"What is it?"

"The problem is whether the same hand wrote the words on these two pieces of paper. Did they?"

"Did they?" repeated the doctor scornfully. "Did you expect an answer to that—at once—in a minute? Upon the specimens you have brought? My stars! Man! There are only two words on this piece."

"I thought it would not require much time——"

"Much time!" exclaimed the doctor. "Well, it

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wouldn't require much time. It requires measurements, it requires the microscope to pick out the arcs. That is all. I could get at it to-morrow morning and in a few hours——"

"To-night," said Peter firmly. "I know that this sounds unreasonable. Look here. It is worth a thousand dollars for me to know to-night."

The doctor swallowed.

"You want a yes or no answer?"

"And I want you to telephone me. No matter what hour, I shall be waiting. Here is my number. No matter what hour. You understand. A thousand dollars."

The other swallowed again.

"It isn't worth a thousand dollars."

"It is to me," said Peter earnestly.

At half past four in the morning when Peter was staring out at the first color in the Eastern sky, filled with strange chill of a sleepless night, his telephone rang at last.

He had his answer

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At about half past four in the afternoon five days later Brena Selcross walked into the office of Colby Pennington. She had come directly from the pier on the North River. Her face was white, her sensitive lips moved uneasily as if seeking to suppress emotions of their own. Pennington was moved by her presence.

"I am a friend of Mr. DeWolfe's," she said. "I have sent a wireless addressed to him here. I have been on the sea for eleven days."

Pennington held up the undelivered envelope.

"Are you Miss Selcross?" he asked. "Well, Peter DeWolfe sent you a cablegram—something about advising you to delay your coming. You had started. Too bad. Just now Mr. DeWolfe is out of town."

"Out of town?"

"Why, yes. He went a few days ago. He had something to investigate. We rather expected to hear from him. He went off in a hurry—some hurry and flurry. I believe he had received some kind of message."

Pennington stopped.



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“For God’s sake what’s the matter?”

Brena Selcoss, leaning forward in her chair, had thrown her arms upon his desk and in the curve of one elbow she had buried her face.

For a moment she appeared as lifeless as if she had been strick a crashing blow upon the head.

## XVII

BRENA SELCOSS raised her head from Colby Pennington's desk and stared at Peter's lawyer with an expression of terror in her parted lips, in her eyes, in her white hands, held out as if to ward away a hideous idea.

"You let him go!" she exclaimed in a breaking shaken voice.

"Let him go?" asked the astounded Colby. "Why shouldn't he go? Is there any reason——"

It was evident to Brena that this man had not been in Peter's confidence; he could not know that a call like this had come to the other two men and that Peter might be the third to go. She interrupted him with a gesture of impatience, saying, "He left no word—no address—nothing with which to trace him?"

"Not with me."

Leaning forward he pressed a pearl button on

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his desk, then seized a cigar, nipped the end off with his large white teeth, looked again at Brena, lovely in spite of her grief and terror, and threw it back into the box. Usually Pennington was the master of any meeting with a stranger, but now something of that immortal personality which was hers, something in her bearing, something in her eyes, something in that calm of distant mountains that she had regained, held Colby silent until the door of his office opened and the chief clerk stepped in from the cork composition flooring outside onto the noiseless padded green carpeting inside.

"Fred."

"Yes, sir."

"Did Mr. DeWolfe say where he was going—did he leave any word with us?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?"

"Why, if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Pennington, he said that he was going to New Orleans, Fort Worth, and a place called Kremlin Wells, Texas. He was to be there—— Excuse me."

The chief clerk picked up from the desk the bronze

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framed calendar and moved his pencil on it. He said, "He was to be there on the 24th, but gave no address there. The twenty-fourth is four days from now."

"Kremlin Wells, Texas? I never heard of such a place," said Pennington scowling after the manner of one who dislikes any fact not within the swing of his own radius.

"Nor had I. I looked it up. Not in the geography. But it's in the railroad guide—a way station, probably with a water tank, on the Texas Central and New Mexico—on the desert near the border between the two states, Mr. Pennington. That was all that he said. He left some papers to put in our safe and asked me to open them and attend to them if he was not back in three weeks."

"Thank you," said Pennington. "That's all, Fred."

"Wait!"

Brena had spoken in a low tone, but with that authority sometimes heard in her voice.

The chief clerk stopped as if her word had been a bullet in his lungs.

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"Will you help me?" she said to Peter's lawyer.  
"I assure you that he would wish it."

Colby looked at her as one would look at a new model of some automobile; at last he nodded.

"I want to know the first train leaving New York for St. Louis and Texas," she said. "I want some one to go for a ticket and reservations to Kremlin Wells or the nearest point. I want a taxicab. I want you to do everything in your power to get me to Kremlin Wells before the twenty-fourth. It must be done!"

Pennington stared at her.

"Very unusual," he muttered. "But I said we'd do it, Miss Selcoss."

Partly because of the assistance of his office force, Brena was on her way to St. Louis, without even hand baggage, but within an hour; partly because of it she was on a train that rolled into Dallas through the railroad yards with the shabby wooden settlements, seen again from her berth through the slit of window beneath the curtain as she raised her weight on one elbow. It had not changed completely since she had seen it on her return after Jim



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Hennepin had disappeared. This morning began the 23rd of the month; she had the sense of racing to Kremlin Wells in a contest with death.

At the final junction point of her long journey, tired, nerve-wracked by unremitting heat of night and day and by the strain of suspense, she found it necessary to wait under a train shed, where in the waiting room or on the platform the midday humidity created a smothering steam filled with the gases belched from locomotive stacks and the ear-smashing explosions from engine exhausts and the impact of car couplings. The train for the West was three hours late. She could not leave the station; she walked back and forth, her weary eyes held open wide by will, her jaw firm. And dogging every step she took was the fear that she would be too late, that when daylight came on the twenty-fourth she would not yet be at her destination.

The conductor on the Westbound Mail was not of the same mind. Beautiful young women traveling alone do not alight every day in "holes in the desert" as he called the Wells; he considered it less desirable to set her down sometime in the dark hour

## The Vanishing Men 271

between three and four. He said the place consisted of a siding, a water tank, a general store, five houses, two saloons where roulette wheels were going during the sheep herder's season, an adobe ruin and a hotel with three rooms above a bar.

"I am sure it will be all right," said Brena. "But even if it were not I would have to leave this train there."

At about three the porter woke her. There were ten minutes for dressing, and then she heard the whine of the brakes, and with muddy, sleep thickened senses, with the ache of stiff bones and muscles and nerves after the heat, the inadequate sleep and the strain, she felt out from the lower step with one foot into the bottomless depths of blackness for the boards of the platform.

When the soft night breeze that flowed in a steady stream from the Southwest had blown the daze away as if it were a dust that had settled on her, the train had been swallowed in the dark.

She could hear the splash of water leaking from the bottom of the railroad tank and occasionally the heat lightning on the horizon covered the desert

toward the South with the white flare of a photographer's flashlight powder, disclosing the vast expanse broken by black patches of desert vegetation. But her attention was now held by a dim swinging lantern that came toward her out of the black plush of the dark, as if it came with volition and movement of its own.

When this light came close to her, she felt an impulse to leap back into the dark as one who is desperate might leap into the depths of black waters; when the light was raised toward her face so that its possessor might see her, she wished that she had fled.

The face on the other side of the light was the essence of brutality—the black pupils in bloodshot eyes, the sun-baked skin drawn taut over immense protruding cheek bones, the thin wrinkled upper lip over a full red drooping under lip, the broad, wide nostrils, the thick gleaming muscular neck of the half-breed Mexican and Indian.

Brena closed her fingers under cover of the dark and made the pressure of nails in her own palm summon her will to put her face nearer his and to

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she speak before he could speak, so that she might escape from all manner of being on the defensive.

She said in a firm voice, "I came to find some one."

The other grunted incredulously.

"He came here within a day or two."

The Mexican raised one dark hand and pulled the long lobe of one ear; his expression was crafty. He said, "Maybe so, quien sabe?"

"At the hotel," she suggested.

The man with the lantern raised it again to look at her; he was silent, and then suddenly he grinned,

"Oh, at hotel, eh? Ha! I know heem. Certain. At the hotel. He come by big automobile."

"Peter DeWolfe."

The other shook his head; he did not know. He said in a soothing, coddling voice, "S'all ri', Missy. You come, eh?" He beckoned with a finger.

Brena nodded and followed him as he walked on before, the lantern swinging at his knees, the shadows of his short bowed legs scissoring on the gravel and the non-committal dark beyond in every

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direction squirming and alive with black maggots of fear.

Suddenly the lantern illumined an entrance cut in a high adobe wall. The man, turning around, said in his petting voice. "Come." Brena stepped through into an enclosure without roof; the stars of the sky shone down with their little white needles of light. The lantern, however, now threw its light upon a little two-story wooden building within the old walls. This structure was dark below except for the lantern's light flung from the glass; its faint two squares of windows above were black on either side of a doorway reached by narrow rickety wooden stairs built on the exterior of the house.

"Up," commanded the Mexican with his hand on the rail.

Brena hesitated.

"I take you to heem."

She began to climb, gripping the hand polished rail to steady her nerves by the force of her own arm muscles.

"In! This my house. I keep for Mister Glaub. In!"

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She passed by him as he flattened himself against the door jamb.

Four closed doors, unpainted and covered with penciled signatures, dates, arithmetic, and scrawled faces and verses, almost filled the walls of the narrow seven feet of square hall. With a grunt, like a pig's, the Mexican opened one of these doors and plucked at Brena's elbow.

"Look! What I say? This heem?"

The lantern's circle of light rose and widened as he held it higher until it covered a cot on which a waking sleeper was pushing himself up on one arm and reaching under a pillow with the other hand.

"A lady," the Mexican said, and putting the lantern on the bare boards, he slid out and closed the door.

The man on the cot sprang up, raised the lantern, and at the end of a high exclamation he gasped for another breath and ejaculated, "Brena!"

"Yes, Peter. Thank God, Peter, I came in time."

"Time—time for what? I'm all right, dear. I cabled you to wait."

"I'd started, Peter. I didn't get it."

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"They told you in New York?"

"Yes, Peter, they said you'd had a call."

"I didn't say so, dear. I said I had business here."

"I don't care—you forget. You are the third—I couldn't stand it, Peter. It was you—that's different."

"You're tired out." He held the lantern higher again.

"No, I'm not, Peter," she said, with a brisk unconvincing lie. "I want you to be glad I came."

He dropped the lantern; it went out. He put his arms around her and bent her head close to his shoulder as he patted her hair with the open palm of his hand. He said, "Glad? Me? Glad? Brena! I can't say it, dear. The cup runs over at the brim!"

"I've been in mortal fear, Peter," she whispered and shivered in his arms. "I thought I had sent you away to your end—the thing that took the others."

"No," said he.

"Can you tell, Peter?"

"I can't tell—sure. I can guess. I guess I'm

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going to fix everything. If not, there's something too big—too ghastly——”

“But if you never came back to me—if anything——” She stopped. “Why Peter, I flung myself down sometimes. I prayed to be forgiven for ever having spoken to you. I begged relief from the hideous idea that I had let you start at all.”

“Look here,” he said severely. “Did you send me that warning—to the steamer?”

She was silent.

“Answer.”

“Yes. I thought I must stop you, dear.”

“Bad business,” he said. “Look here, Brena. For the first time in my life I’ve been figuring what a real partnership really means. And it can’t exist without perfect unbroken truth—playing the game, not separately, but together—all the time—an unbroken record.”

She said, “I know. There isn’t much to say. My fear. My conscience. And it was you who were going to take the risk. Not anybody else, Peter—and I loved you. I took the paper from a package from the chemist’s shop. I wrote.”



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"It won't do," he said harshly. "It is a bad spot on the fruit."

For a long time she sat on the edge of his cot without a word. At last, "Peter."

"Yes."

"Tell me, Peter. There must have been times when you wondered about me—doubted me—questioned me. Did you keep faith?"

He waited, but his answer was clear. It was not only an answer to her question; in his voice there was more—an understanding of the truth that right and wrong are not readily divided with a high impassable wall between them. There is a teetering, and that which counts is the spirit of the game, that leads one to put weight most often on the right end. All this he said to her in the one word: "No."

After a moment her hand came through the dark into his.

"I think we are all right, Peter," she said. "If we can ever have each other, dear—forever—I think we could——"

"Do what?"

"Work out something pretty fine."

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"We will," he said. "I'm almost at the point where I score, Brena. I've brought a high-powered car here. Two hundred odd miles into this hell of desert. And to-morrow. I go to-morrow."

He struck a match and relit the lantern.

"Tell me, Peter," she said, brushing the red-gold hair back from her forehead.

"I did tell you. I said I had a theory—a theory about where they went—Hennepin first—and Parmalee. If I am not right, heaven help us! I've not been afraid yet—not in my real self. If I'm right I'll laugh at myself for toting a gun around and for a lot of fool ideas I've had. But if I'm wrong now, I'd be afraid. I'm no coward, but I'd squirm with fear!"

Her eyes were full of a troubled expression.

"But you don't tell me, Peter."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I was wrong it would always appear to you that I had been the inventor of injustice. Let me test your faith in me, Brena. Give me three days more."

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"Yes, but when you ride off into the desert—to danger, you said, provided you were wrong—I'm going too."

"You can't."

"Yes, I am going with you, Peter."

"It might be too hideous."

"I am going."

The strange authority with which she sometimes spoke was now in her voice and in her eyes; it was as if she were speaking, not out of herself alone, but were one who voiced a decree of those who had willed an inexorable end.

"Let me show you then where we are going," he said with his lips pressed together. "Let me show you a map. Let me tell you how we shall have to steer our way over a trailless waste by compass as if we were at sea! It's a country of terrible distances and heat and thirst. If the car breaks down they'd never hear of us."

"We'd be out there for years," she said in the voice of one who in a great happiness feels sleep pulling down the eyelids, drawing its mists across the mind. "We'd have our hands—like this—to—

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gether. But very bony, I suppose. I'd rather—do that, Peter—than—not have—each other——”

He picked her up in his arms. He felt her limp weight pulling at his shoulders. He heard her whispering, “I’m not ill, Peter. I’m just tired. And I don’t have to pretend with you, do I?” He felt her warm breath.

He put her down at full length on the cot and sitting on the floor beside her he moved his fingertips across her white forehead. Her profile of features, of body, of drapery, made him think of the queens and saints carved in marble on the tops of sarcophagi in ancient abbeys; lying in this sordid little room, her face turned toward the smoky ceiling, nevertheless she had their calm, their suggestion of belonging to great emotions, a season of great deeds and to some grand continuity. Brena had been carved by a great sculptor, and the limp hand that still rested in sleep upon his bare neck was warm with the promise of living expectancies.

## XVIII

AFTER night had begun to creep in again across the desert from the East, with a flow like melted tar, suddenly that ooze was split in the middle by the great arc of the moon's top coming over the horizon like the top of a bald head of one who pulls himself over a wall. The heat of the day yielded suddenly to the patient Southeast wind whose flow was as changeless as that of some gentle river.

Brena, who had slept long and restfully in spite of the stinging dry heat, had awakened before the sun had gone down to find Peter was attending to the last details of equipping the high-powered car that he had bought in El Paso. It was below the window in the old courtyard with the crumbling adobe wall.

"Hello," he had said, looking up. "You just missed seeing the population of this town. The entire ten were here. They don't know we're going to strike into the desert instead of going eastward."

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He had held up his fingers to count on them. "We're all provisioned now—from the General Store—gasoline cans, water in demijohns, matches, canned beans and other things, a bottle of olives, guaranteed very old, and one paper napkin. I say—why do you ever do your hair up at all? It's rather wonderful, falling all around like that."

"I didn't take it down."

"No, I did. I ran it through my fingers like a miser with his gold—and his untarnished copper threads, if a miser has them too. Why not braid it? We're going where there are no fashions, Brena."

"To-day?"

"To-night. There'll be a white moon as big as a plate for hours. We'll make a hundred miles at least through the depression that runs along the bed of some prehistoric torrent to the Northwest. Thanks to old Father Carlos, the hard-headed Jesuit, it's on the map. Easy to follow."

When the purple crêpe of evening had been spread over the baking sands and the stars had been set out in their infinite careless pattern in the

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high desert sky, the car, with opened muffler, turned her nose out of the trail that followed the line of the railroad and began to kick the sand behind as if she were a hound. It was as if she were leaving forever the sight and memory of mankind.

This country is without mercy to living things. After thirty miles of hard pulling through the bare loose-surfaced plain, tossed gently about as if they were riding in a motorboat over the long rollers of the sea, they saw before them on the crest of a sand wave a running pack of coyotes, who came up suddenly, black against the moonlight like dog fish lifted into sight on a wave. But after that all vegetation and even the cacti which stood like trained seals, their flappers held out as if ready to begin a dance, became sparse, and the emptiness was that of the frontier of death itself.

Peter turned to look at Brena. Her face, illumined by the moon, was lifted a little; with the hair blown back by the hot wind, her eyes glistened like those of one who rides toward battle in a calm spirit. She felt, perhaps, his gaze, and, turning, smiled. She wondered why he had been unwilling

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to tell her why they went, what he sought, the facts he had found.

"Will you tell me—afterward?" she asked.

"Yes—if I win," he answered. "I will tell you then. Before that I've no particular right to do it—not till I'm sure. The thing is too tremendous!"

She pulled back the silk sleeves from her round arms that in the pale moonlight were those of an ancient Grecian marble. She folded them and, as they drove on, she fixed her dark eyes again upon the North with the same calm, the same suggestion of being the possessor of a spirit as eternal as that of the sea.

When the moon had reached the bottom of the bowl of the sky, DeWolfe looked again at his speedometer.

"Did you notice that our searchlight no longer picks up little insects and turns them into flashes of silver?" he asked.

"Yes."

He stopped the car to fill the radiator.

"We are coming into the most arid land in the world, where no rain falls and there is no dew. It



is the country of eternal stillness. There is no life; not even the insects exist here. There is no motion. There is no sound. Listen!"

Brena looked about at the great flat disk of the desert as she stood with her hand on Peter's shoulder; it was like a world of hardened concrete, without flexibility, without a motion. She listened and heard only her heart and the throb of silence that comes only in places of utter stillness.

"I'm glad I'm with you, Peter," she said. "There is a threat here, isn't there?"

He nodded. "We've been seventy-five miles. To a man on foot without water that would be death—a horrible death with the sand dragging at the feet—just like the flies one sees trying to pull their legs along fly paper, with the heat burning all moisture out of the body, with the silence and the stillness inviting him to madness, and his aching limbs gradually turning his footpath around and around in smaller circles to a center of death."

They plowed on, saying little. Brena felt the infection of Peter's tensivity; at times it caused her to grip the edges of the leather cushion beneath her.

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The ride became like a nightmare with the eternal desert slipping behind, and ever coming forth from the horizon in front like an endless belt on which the wheels beneath them rolled madly without progress. The heat was like the heat in a dream, sprayed in a needle shower into their faces as the car rocked on. The stars, once white and cool, became red hot—a million little knife points of spiteful light. The ears were tired of the song of the motor and the unceasing swish of the sand under the mud guards—a noise that suggested a drill boring endlessly and scattering its fine débris. The desert was a petrified sea yielding brackish, sulphurous odors to the dry and aching nostrils. And Brena's thoughts became giblets tossed up in a hot stew in the cauldron of anxiety, pieces of memory arising to the bubbling surface and whirling about among doubts and fears, hopes and prayers.

At the end of a hundred miles dawn began to come in the brilliant colors of silken veils of rainbow diversity shaken out from the East. With startling suddenness the air of the desert became the tint of heliotrope. The dark sky split into great

scarred with irregularity,  
talking machine record wi  
The hours had called for  
eyes that had stared so long  
and of aching arm muscles  
and tugs of the front wheels  
come to a stop and shut off

"Both of us need a rest  
Brena. "And you need bre

She did not talk to him a  
when, having looked back alc  
old prehistoric torrent bed n  
old banks with drifting sand  
map, measuring and consult  
His anxiety was evident.

They went forward again  
full light of day into a track

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Brena, holding the compass in her hands, gave directions to him as he moved the wheel. At the end of twenty miles more Brena uttered an exclamation.

"What is that on the desert?" she asked. "Peter, look! There! To the left."

A little point of light shone on the sand as if a diamond had caught the sunlight and had extracted from it a bit of its essence to outshine the sun himself. Peter, steering toward it, looked down over the edge of the car as one might look over the edge of a boat at some piece of strange flotsam sighted in midocean. This was strange flotsam indeed. Peter having stopped the car again to pick it up, showed it to Brena; it was an empty vial of white glass.

Peter sprang out of the car, and, walking about in widening circles, searched the ground. He appeared excited. Time and time again he looked at the little glass vial.

"Some one has been here," said Brena. "I'm just Irish enough to say that, Peter."

wheel once more.

At nine o'clock they came  
mound on the desert; it ap  
fat round back of some gi  
buried itself for a sleep  
wallow of vast area.

"There it is!" exclaim  
Brena. Look to the West  
is the Llano Estacado—the  
Spanish explorers called it.  
on the horizon—the haze t  
aries told about. It comes  
the Mescalero Ridge!"

"And it means that we ha

"Yes, found our way.  
more."

"Where are we going?"

## The Vanishing Men 291

city at the base of a high cliff, built of clay which crumbled centuries ago into dust. The wall is left perhaps as it was two centuries ago. A dry well. A carving upon the rock. A windless place occupied only by horned toads and perhaps one other misshapen thing."

At three o'clock they had stopped again to eat; they were able to see in the West the tops of distant mountains marked by a deeper, duller blue than the thin cloudless rotunda of the sky. An hour later they came within sight of the tableland upon which these mountains were set like piles of food upon a giant's doorstep. And this step up—this mesa—with its precipitous edge, marked the end of the desert.

"The cliffs that rise to that table land are impassable," said Peter, with his eyes alight and his voice filled with excitement. "The city was built below their protection around a great well and walled in front with thick fortifications. We shall see them, Brena!"

When at last they had come to these crumbling walls with the great gaping mouth of an ancient

in jagged overhanging c  
Upon the base of this ro  
carved, was the symbol of

Brena clutched Peter's

"It did have a meaning t  
ing syllables.

"A terrible meaning, Br

Amidst the gigantic pr  
and cliff, this figure of the  
brought from the lands o  
by a craven tribe fleeing  
looked down with its heathe  
of a city around an oasis,  
spring. It had seen perha  
going of generations with  
strange rites, barbaric hum  
of a little pomp and power  
dance of naked orient

## The Vanishing Men 293

loads of water carried from the well to irrigation ditches, the harvest, the miracles of water. But perhaps it had seen too the day when a subterranean shift had driven the underground water course away, and in a night drained out the life-maintaining supply of five thousand panic-stricken praying men and women and their lamenting priests. Perhaps, if tradition were right, it knew where the treasures of that city had been hid away. It had seen the fine sand blown from the edge of the mesa far above hang in the air and come drifting down through the centuries to cover the crumbling ruins within an enclosure where no longer a living thing moved and no breeze, however slight, ever disturbed the veil of dust that was spread upon the level space within the walls.

"A place where no wind ever blows," said Peter. "Father Carlos over two centuries ago wrote that down. A lifeless place."

"You are not going into it alone," said Brena firmly. "I will go with you."

"It isn't right, Brena. I do not know what we shall find."



you know?

"I only guess," he answered.  
none. I think, Brena, that bey  
is freedom for us—life for us—

"I must go with you."

He nodded.

At the entrance he stopped, and  
ground—the film, the blanket  
uttered an exclamation.

"What do you see, Peter?"

"I see a record in the sand."

"What record?"

"We shall see more," he said

In the center of the enclosure  
eral acres of the almost level site  
and vanished pueblo of clay and  
one monument of permanence; it  
such of mind as it is

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ing its mouth, but its contour still stood up out of the film of gray-yellow dust as if it were possessed of some grim determination to compete with the feathered serpent, the Kuk-ul-can, carved on the rocky face of the mesa above, to become, after the passing of endless centuries, the sole survivor of the Pueblo Mescalero. It appeared to be a thing possessed of the patience of endless days, and endless ages, though no human eyes would look upon it again and though year in and year out the gigantic cliff, the desert and the cloudless sky were motionless and mute.

Toward this memorial of tragedy, of death, of decay, of the insignificance of time, of the inconsequence of an age of man, Brena and Peter, like two creatures of a moment of life, walked with solemn, awed faces.

"Look!" said Peter suddenly. "Have you your nerve? Look!"

He pointed to a pile of charred bones lying close to the well. Among them was a piece of human skull blackened as if by fire.

of his hand.

"This was no prehistoric  
"See! The eyelets and the  
leather long ago vanished.  
of pearl buttons, a pocket knife  
a wallet. This man lost his  
ago."

She tried to speak, wetting  
tip of her tongue.

"There are things of gold  
"Keep your nerve, dear. Look

He held out in his trembling  
ring with an H deeply engraved

"That!" exclaimed Brena  
his!—Jim Hennepin's. This  
"Yes."

Brena moved toward the



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"He was killed," she said. "He was shot or stabbed."

"No," replied Peter grimly. "It was worse than that—more ghastly. He was killed. But it was not by a human hand."

well without walking away  
said Peter, taking her by t  
ing squarely into her dark  
leave you alone a minute. It  
you to do it just the same."

"Where are you going?"

"Outside the wall again.  
there that you did not see."

Brena shivered.

"Don't be afraid, dear," he  
—both of us—the lesson of  
told each other that fear wa  
waste. We are on the verge  
rible a waste it can be."

She put her hands in his;  
"You see, Peter, I am in the  
the same I'll do as you tell me

## The Vanishing Men 299

ward as if meditating, she leaned back against the hot, flat face of one of the huge stone blocks of the well curb, following him with her steady gaze. He disappeared outside the old wall, and as he vanished, so vanished all that attached her to the living world. There was no sound, no motion within the range of the senses; the place of death was still. The sun still hanging in the western sky threw purple shadows of the cliff that were like shadows destined to lie immovable to eternity upon the motionless sand. Northerners might blow across the mesa above, the Southeast Gulf winds might roll up from the south over the desert; but here no breath of air stirred. Not even a horned toad, like a piece of dried and shriveled cactus skin, drew with its thorny little tail any fine trail upon the dust. Brena felt as if she too had become incapable of movement and of sound; she had a sense of being transformed into stone—an adamantine statue of a woman, carved from rock, waiting beside the waterless well under the beating sun, the cloudless infinity of sky, the cliff, until the crack of doom.

Suddenly into this world of motionless fixity,

to see from what thing th  
a summoning of her coura;

From the table lands abo  
come swooping down on wi  
and turning, with one eye co  
time before he had picked  
and had returned to the sce  
Black, ill-omened, carrion  
Brena felt glad that he had  
and motion—into this plac  
filled by the silences and r  
watched the magnificent gr  
flight until Peter's voice b  
and flapping toward the w  
circle up whence he had con

"Brena," said Peter, who  
expression drawn as if with

## The Vanishing Men 301

"Yes?"

"Sit down with me here where these blocks cast a shadow, dear. I will show you what I have found—a thing like the writing of a giant finger of justice—here in the desert. But first I want to tell you a tale, Brena—true, revolting and terrible."

"Tell me," she said, sitting with her elbows on her knees.

"It is of surprising brevity, Brena," he asserted. "Its simplicity is the thing that makes ridiculous the many things I expected, all the nightmares of the unknown. I told you, dear, that I was no Master Mind—no Great Analyst in capital letters. I was right. I stumbled onto the trail. I used my head. That's all."

He stopped to think.

"And yet the simplicity is hideous!" he said.

Brena glanced toward all that remained of Jim Hennepin of Virginia—the blackened fleshless relics of his existence.

"He deserved it, perhaps," said Peter pointing. "He tried to cash in his knowledge."

"You told me last night of the superstition of



when he went away. The wonder about the other."

"You thought it must

"Yes. It had been used. It was used by one man to Brena leaned forward.

"I began to be sure, B expert knowledge pronounced a check made out by the one to his death here was written with an attempt to disguise "This Sign," on the scrap left with you and that you you that when I first took cause your indorsement with Brena—of anybody."

## The Vanishing Men 303

"I understand," she said. "I understand. And the scrap of paper was a part of the bait?"

Peter raised his hand as if to say that he wished to go on in his own way. "It was chance too that led me to the motive for ridding the world of Hennepin. That miserable man had become a menace. He knew too much. He knew of a long series of embezzlements from a certain estate in Texas. A capitalist had bought vast quantities of something—on speculation—and his agent after his death deceived the executors as to the extent of his holdings. I have had a clue from an old account book sifted to the bottom."

"And Jim Hennepin knew?"

"Knew and began a merciless blackmail, threatening ruin. I can see him now, insatiable, hungry, losing in speculations, asking for more, hounding a man who was balancing between success and failure and always hinting at bankruptcy and the penitentiary."

Peter went on. He told of the probability that Compton Parmalee, the hounded man, a physical coward, but resourceful and ingenious, had come

wanted to take the blackma  
he would never come back.

"To kill him?" asked B

"No," replied Peter. 'He feared that. He feared the result. He had a bett

"And how?" she asked.

"It is all there—here in said. "A ghastly record. but in this deep fine dust, I the story."

He paused; he lit a cigar  
"There around the entrance  
hoof-prints—almost lost—l  
horses, two saddled and c  
They came in two horses

.....

## The Vanishing Men 305

came on. One man slept. The other crept to the animals and he rode away."

"Rode away? Left Jim Hennepin here?"

"Yes, beyond hope—no horse, no water."

"How do you know?"

"Because, Brena, when the three horses went out into the desert their footprints are in single file—one man led the other two. I will show you. It is in the sand—a record and a good guess."

He was silent and he broke his silence with a cry.

"I can see him—Hennepin—awakening, realizing, seeing far away the little galloping specks in the pale moonlight with the treacherous man upon the leader—a tiny bobbing figure. I can hear the curses hurled after them. And he—the one left—alone under the moon, alone under the sun, alone under the moon again—without a drop—rushing out into the desert, only to be driven back to the shade after weary marches dragging through the sand, hunting among the rocks, crazed with thirst, gone mad, cursing, blithering mad—his tongue black—the end—perhaps a thought of you—the cur!"

swinging overhead."

"Seven years ago,"

"Yes, seven years. I  
fear—that was the pay

"Compton Parmalee?

She said it without a

"Yes," said Peter. "I  
out one blackmailer. I  
sprang up—fear."

"He feared discovery

"Yes, and something  
sure that Hennepin was  
upon him—the fear the  
and alternating with the  
who ever hears those t  
promises of vengeance  
desert as he rode away

## The Vanishing Men 307

"Yes," said Peter. "That was why Parmalee destroyed the map. He had probably ridden back to some other settlement after shooting Hennepin's horse in some gully and he wanted to wipe out all evidence. For months he resisted the temptation—that burned and scorched inside—to see you."

"To find out whether I had been told anything about Hennepin's destination? And then when he wasn't sure—when there was that scrap of paper not accounted for——! Peter, it is too horrible; he proposed that strange marriage agreement in order to go away and take me with him. He was afraid I might remember some word—give some clew."

"No," replied Peter. "It was that of course. But that was not all. The spark of real man that you saw in him was there, Brena. Terror put it out at last, but the real tragedy of Parmalee was that he had that spark."

He waited for her to look up again; she had been staring down at the yellow-gray dust.

"I suppose you can see," he went on. "I suppose you can see now what was in his mind. Two pictures. One was the picture of Jim Hennepin

saw him escaping from  
knows how—but escap  
fort, some chance, son  
Parmalee's brain coul  
couldn't be put out of re  
Hennepin seeking him.  
a thousand haunting pi  
malicious, desperate, hat  
muscles. He saw him s  
his quarry. He saw him  
ture gallery, and, sudden  
realizing that Parmalee  
with renewed wrath whic  
a knife."

"At last that imaginary  
a reality," said Brena. 'a  
a reflection in a piece of

## The Vanishing Men 309

employment as a servant. He never knew when Hennepin might come—and kill.”

“But he saw the other picture too. He saw the buzzards hovering over what was left of Hennepin, he saw a whitened skeleton grinning up at the sunlit sky and at the stars, Brena. That’s what he saw. And some day some one would somehow come there. Perhaps some one had been there already. Perhaps at the very minute a prospector, dirty and unshaved, or some accursed archeological explorer from a university was in that very town where they had bought the horses and was telling of the skeleton and of finding the skeleton of the riderless horse with the bit still held between the white teeth. He might have that bit in his pocket. Some one recognizes it. Somehow the chain once started never ends until——”

“There comes a hand upon the shoulder,” said Brena, as if in a dream, “and a voice saying, ‘We have looked a long time for you.’”

“Yes. There wasn’t one fear,” Peter said, marking two lines in the sand with his forefinger. “There were two fears. They fought each other and their



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battleground was Parmalee's soul. It was trampled into a wallow of terror, of questioning, of doubt. Do you know, Brena, that somehow there creeps into me a great pity for him?"

"If he had been able to put his finger upon some button that would have blown him to bits he would have taken that way," she said. "But he had an exaggerated instinct for self-preservation. It threw him back from any approach to suicide."

Peter, getting up, came to her and put his hand upon her shoulder as if to give her strength. She had spoken with a voice too evenly measured to deceive him as to the strain she felt. It had been a long pull for her, he thought. The last steps, though they might lead out into the sunlight of freedom, were upon rough ground—rough even for a man. He was wondering how he could save her from pain. He wanted to have this surgery over, and to have it over there was only one way.

"It was inevitable that he would come here—in the end," he said. "He had to see. He had covered his terrors by a cowardly process of trying to make you believe that some mystery that clung to you

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was the cause of them. He began to fear disclosure. He feared that he would allow you to know in some mad moment. He was coming to the end of his rope."

"Yes, the end of his rope."

"He had to make the hideous pilgrimage at last. How could he tell you where he was going—even the direction? It might lead to the uncovering of his movements. And then when at last he had made up his mind to come, he felt almost gay—the very promise of an answer to which of his two fears he must devote himself gave him a moment of something almost like gayety. What perversion!"

Peter stopped and looked up at the ugly symbol of Kuk-ul-can carved on the rocks.

"He procured a copy of Father Carlos' map a second time," he said. "He had to have it to find the way. After four terrible years he revisited the Pueblo Mescalero, two hundred miles from nowhere. It called him back. He had to come."

He stopped again, looking at Brena, whose palms were pressed against her knees, whose face with its wonderful profile was still held uplifted looking

... a high-pov  
Peter. "And all alone he c

"And where is he now?"  
sudden disclosure of her f  
Where is he now?"

She looked searchingly a  
face, where upon the surf  
strength had been engraved  
tenderness perhaps by a gre  
of love and life.

"He is here again," he ans  
. . . Do you understand?"

## XX

"I UNDERSTAND," said Brena.

"Then come with me," Peter said, holding out his hands. "I will show you all that remains—the record—the story written on the sand and dust.

He led her again toward the charred bones; he found no resistance in her.

"Look there, Brena. Do you see the footprints? Here are yours and mine. But look again on the sand. There are others too. A thin veil of dust is over them. They move here and there; they criss-cross and move away. They are the footprints of Compton Parmalee. He has come to stand gazing down at the white skeleton—white as oyster shells."

"Blackened," she said.

"Wait!" Peter said. "There are the spots where he stood looking down. He had his answer; no living Jim Hennepin of Virginia would ever fill him with lead. And as he stood, Brena, perhaps gazing down for a long, long time—because his footsteps

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are lost in that stew of impressions—he was filled with all the concentrated terror that I suppose only a murderer can know. He went into a crazy wild panic of fear. These bones were his—the grinning skull. They must be hidden.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because he has moved toward this old well. He reached the stone well curb. He sprang up. Do you see the marks? He found the mouth choked with massive blocks. Nothing could be hidden there! His track moved back.”

“Go on,” said Brena.

“Now he goes running out along the walls searching for something. Look! Here! He ran out along the base of the wall searching.”

“For what?”

“For bits of wood—for anything that would burn—for fuel. He must have a funeral pyre. He has been crazed by fear again. But he finds nothing, Brena. There is no wood here, no paper, no grass. There’s nothing but sand and stone. Let him run about till he drops. There is no mercy for him. Nothing that will burn. Nothing within

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a half a hundred miles. Like Hennepin, he too now screams and the scream comes back from the cliff with a terrible mockery."

"But he did find fuel, Peter," she said. "He must have found something."

"Yes, he found something that would do—not very well, as we can see. He had hoped for better results than he got. Come."

On the way toward the gate of the fortification walls Peter stopped and kicked at a blackened spot on the sand. He said laconically, "Their fire. Where they ate their last supper together—the vanished men."

The sun had dropped below the mountains above the mesa; its needled fire had settled down into a hot layer of dull, sullen heat. But beyond the wall where their car stood the open desert, bare, cruel, with the heat waves running like endless herds of sheep along the quivering horizon, was a relief from that strange spell of the dried well, the ruins, the fine yellow-gray dust, and the silence.

Brena filled her lungs as one does who has come from the interior of a mortuary.

without any weakening.  
that."

He took her hand.

"I'm not willing to let  
Peter," she said. "I've paid  
show me. And then let's  
of our ways."

"Our way," he insisted  
ways. The earning of our

She shook her head a little  
stirred within, but they were  
and Peter's eyes were upon  
before.

He dropped behind her  
that she faced toward the top  
of the fortification wall.

"There," said he. "You  
drove in."

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Standing on the desert, like a ragged unkempt impropriety, was the ruin of a touring car. All that was left of its top was hanging in wispy strips on the metal frame, its paint and varnish had almost gone, the tires had hardened and crumbled on the wheels, shreds of dry rotted leather dangled from the cushions. Motionless, dead, silent as all else, the car, as if it were a shabby outcast thrown out to die, appeared disconsolate, ready to send forth a wail of loneliness into the emptiness. It had turned its back upon Pueblo Mescalero, as if it had wanted to go away but could not find the strength.


"He came in that, Peter?" Brena asked.

"Yes."

"But never took it away. Did he kill himself?"

"No," Peter answered. "A great abstract justice—a great equity from which there was no appeal—sat in trial of him here. I tell you, Brena, the thing is of magnificent, awe-inspiring dignity. It's a tremendous thing—an unforgettable majesty of inexorable dealing out of sentences. The place of his crime was the scene of his trial, his conviction and





his car—just as we have  
ply of water. Do you see  
on the desert? It is a  
He was so crazed that he  
with him on a hopeless  
When he lost hope after  
back, tapping its content  
until the last drop was gone  
there wherever the sand  
small depressions.”

“But the car?” she asked  
the car?”

“The car was all right  
this way. Don’t go in for  
—the tracks it had made  
trance. But here it stopped  
thing of stateliness—as

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Brena stared at him in open-eyed wonderment.

"He was the instrument of justice—he himself," Peter went on. "A man who would save his life, lost it. The madness of fear brought all that he had to fear—and more."

He paused.

"Brena, I will tell you," he said in a hushed, awed voice. "The man was mad, irresponsible, without power to reason. He was in a panic of fear. He wanted to hide his crime at any cost. He had filled his gasoline tank for the return journey. Look!"

Peter pointed to the hole in the back of the car into which the gasoline is poured. The screw cap had gone. A bent copper pipe still dangled out of that hole.

"He wanted a hat-full of gasoline. That was the fuel, Brena—the fuel to burn the remains of Jim Hennepin."

He wet his lips.

"He used a siphon. This bent copper pipe taken from his tool chest—a spare length of oil feed

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pipe! And with that he filled his hat and ran back."

Peter looked up into the sky. He went on quietly. "And the siphon ran on. He had forgotten it. It ran on with its little stream saturating the sand until the tank was empty and the heat of the day was evaporating the last drops at the bottom. Parmalee had condemned himself to death! He had lost the fuel he had put in for the return journey!"

Brena pressed her lips tightly together and for many moments looked into the great fanlike spread of the sunset. Then suddenly she turned toward the car and took several steps.

"No," said Peter firmly. "You mustn't."

"I must know, Peter, beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"He is there—nothing for you to see, dear. He must have had the delusion at last that he could drive the car. He's there—at the wheel—fallen forward. And so——"

She looked up.

"And so—to be sure—I took the watch—a gold one—this one. Is it his?"

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He held it out on the palm of his hand.

"Yes, it is—his, Peter."

He looked down at it a moment; then tossed it into the sand as one tosses aside a poisonous fungus.

"Peter."

"Yes."

"We mustn't let this go with us when we go—following us away. We must leave them both—here."

She took his hand.

"I am sure. For myself I can answer. I know the desert has served some great Will. The book is closed."

. . . . .

They slept upon one great square blanket spread on the open desert beneath the stars while the pale moon moved on its great silver arc across the heavens. The Pueblo Mescalero was far behind; from it they had ridden for miles in awed silence. And when they had reached a stopping place upon a rise of ground, neither had dared an

expression. Aching with weariness they had looked at each other mutely and flung themselves down.

Now the second morning, like the first, came over the desert's edge with a host of golden lances; again the air of the desert became a haze of luminous violet hanging above the red and yellow sands and waiting for that clang when the yellow glare was flung forward again over the plain.

Brena awoke, sat up, unbraided her hair and tossed it loose with her fingers. Something within her, that had been growing with the slow growth of stalwart long life, that had suffered no blight, that subconsciously she had protected and nurtured for an unseen end, that had been made ready to withstand assaults by tragic winds, that had lived apart and immune from taint, was now free. As she threw out her arms toward the sun, so now this thing within her for the first time came forth from its depths to greet a dawn of its own.

It was not a thing asking for dramatic crises or for summits of joy; it only asked for the ultimate romance—that of the continuity of a full, strong,

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human life—the adventure of adventures into which the soul throws mind and body, thought and flesh, nerve and will. And because she had found her mate in this ultimate romance, Brena bent over and kissed Peter's lips.

He smiled in his sleep, and slowly his body moved and his eyes opened.

"Where are we going, Peter?" she asked.

"Somewhere with you," he said, sitting up. "Somewhere with you. I suppose we'll have to be married, dear one. But I feel that we were something more than that a long, long time ago."

He turned toward the East and the first flood of golden light illumined his face.

"Do you know, Brena, that there is something not weighed by science and the philosophies, not reckoned by governments nor laws nor customs. It is something that is ours—some new-born thing without material existence, some immortal spirit that we have created—you and I—long ago."

Brena moved her head up and down in silent assent. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her

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dark eyes moist, and a calm smile upon her sensitive, flexible lips.

For now she knew that he too understood the way to the greatest of all the mysteries.

THE END

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/









THE NEW  
REF

This book is  
take

